

January
2024

ANIMATIONTM MAGAZINE

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BEST ANIMATED FEATURE

Disney · Pixar

ELEMENTAL





NEXT BEST PICTURE

**"THOMAS NEWMAN'S SOOTHING SCORE
IS MAGNIFICENT AND EASILY THE BEST
HE'S COMPOSED YET FOR A PIXAR FILM."**

Disney · PIXAR
ELEMENTAL

FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION
IN ALL CATEGORIES INCLUDING

BEST ORIGINAL SCORE
THOMAS NEWMAN

BEST ORIGINAL SONG
"STEAL THE SHOW"

COMPOSED BY
LAUV AND THOMAS NEWMAN
LYRICS BY
LAUV AND MICHAEL MATOSIC



**"COMPOSER
THOMAS NEWMAN
CONTRIBUTES A
WONDERFUL SCORE,
TRULY SURROUNDING
THE TERRIFIC VISUALS
WITH SOME
MEMORABLE
MUSIC."**

AWARDSRADAR



January
2024

Plus
Illumination's
Migration Takes Wing
Merry Little Batman
Scott Pilgrim Takes Off
Coming Attractions of
2024
Award Season's VFX
Contenders
& Much, Much More!

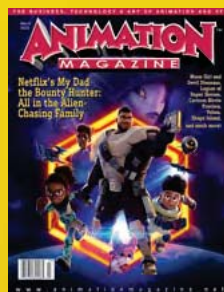
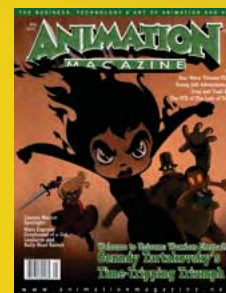
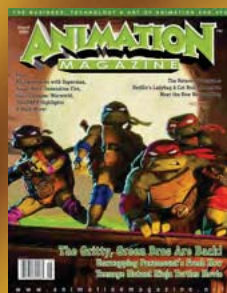
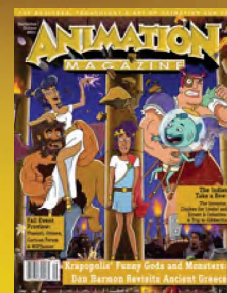
\$7.95 U.S.



**Chicken Run: Dawn of the Nugget
Aardman Hatches a Charming
Sequel After 23 Years**

Looking for Animation Information?

All the Animation Highlights
of the Year at Your Fingertips!



Which one did you miss?

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January
2024

ANIMATIONTM

MAGAZINE



Plus
Chicken Run: Dawn of the Nugget
Merry Little Batman
Scott Pilgrim Takes Off
Coming Attractions of 2024
Award Season VFX Contenders
& Much, Much More!

**Illumination's Migration Takes Wing:
Behind the Scenes of
the Delightful Duck Tale**

\$7.95 U.S.





"The best 'Trol"

Best Animated Feature

Produced by GINA SHAY p.g.a.

Directed by WALT DOHRN

Best Original Song

"BETTER PLACE (REUNION)"

Written by SHELLBACK,
JUSTIN TIMBERLAKE, AMY ALLEN



Is' movie yet?"

Film

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3 Hollywood Music
in Media Awards

INCLUDING

Song - Animated Film

"BETTER PLACE (REUNION)"

Written by SHELLBACK, JUSTIN TIMBERLAKE, AMY ALLEN

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FRAME-BY-FRAME ANIMATION PLANNER

December

THE MUST-HAVE LIST

EVENTS

SNAPSHOTS FROM THE 2023 SUMMIT

A look back at the highlights of this year's star-studded World Animation Summit.

FEATURES

POULTRY IN MOTION

Our U.K. correspondent visits the set of Aardman's delightful new animated movie, *Chicken Run: Dawn of the Nugget*.

THOSE MAGNIFICENT MALLARDS

Benjamin Renner and Colin Stimpson take us behind the scenes of Illumination's *Migration*, which is definitely not just for the birds!

A DARK KNIGHT'S YULETIDE

Director Mike Roth pays homage to Ronald Searle and previous incarnations of the superhero in the new Prime Video feature, *Merry Little Batman*.

TIME PASSAGES

Director Tomohisa Taguchi tackles serious issues in his fantasy, *The Tunnel to Summer, the Exit to Goodbyes*.

COMING ATTRACTIONS!

30 animated movies to look forward to in 2024.

A GRAND EXPEDITION WITH BIG ARTISTIC PAYOFFS

Director Kajsa Næss comments on the colorful simplicity of the acclaimed Norwegian-Belgian animated feature, *Titina*.

TELEVISION/STREAMING

COMIC GENIUS!

Bryan Lee O'Malley and BenDavid Grabinski discuss their super cool Science SARU *Scott Pilgrim* remix.

HAVE YOURSELF A CRIMINAL CHRISTMAS

The DreamWorks Bad Guys wreak some sublime seasonal havoc in their new holiday special.

GOTTA HOST THEM ALL!

Pokémon Concierge gives us a softer, stop-motion take on the popular characters introduced 27 years ago.

A CHILD'S TOY COMES TO LIFE

Award-winning producer Martin Pope discusses his new hybrid adaptation of *The Velveteen Rabbit* for Apple TV+.

A BELOVED KITTY'S CAT-ASTROPHIC HOLIDAY

The creative duo behind Channel 4's new special *Mog's Christmas* discuss the making of their lovely animated special.

A CAT FOR ALL SEASONS

Producer Barney Goodland introduces us to Magic Light's purrrfect new special, *Tabby McTat*.

VFX & TECH

BIRDS, SNAKES AND TOTALITARIAN ARCHITECTURE

VFX supervisor Adrian de Wet details the impressive visuals created for the new *Hunger Games* prequel.

AN EYE ON THE YEAR'S TOP VFX OSCAR CONTENDERS

2023 proved to be a big year for both epic spectacles and subtle, invisible effects.

TECH REVIEWS

Blackmagic's URSA Mini Pro 12K, Lenovo's ThinkPad P16 Gen 2 & Nvidia's RTX 5000 card.

DAY IN THE LIFE

THOUGHTS ON ANIMATING WITH THE NEW MACHINES

Industry veterans address the pros and cons of AI at the recent Manchester Animation Festival.

DAY IN THE LIFE

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF

27 director Flóra Anna Buda shows us the life of an award-winning animator.

COVER A: Aardman's sequel *Chicken Run: Dawn of the Nugget* hatches on Netflix this month.

COVER B: Illumination goes wild for mallards in the holiday season release, *Migration*.



FEATURES

14 POULTRY IN MOTION

Our U.K. correspondent visits the set of Aardman's delightful new animated movie, *Chicken Run: Dawn of the Nugget*.

20 THOSE MAGNIFICENT MALLARDS

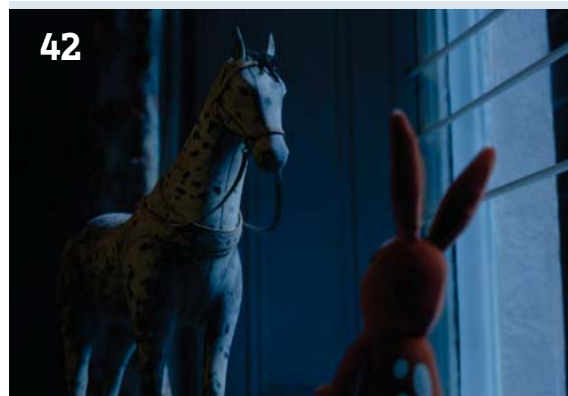
Benjamin Renner and Colin Stimpson take us behind the scenes of Illumination's *Migration*, which is definitely not just for the birds!



TELEVISION/STREAMING

42 A CHILD'S TOY COMES TO LIFE

Award-winning producer Martin Pope discusses his new hybrid adaptation of *The Velveteen Rabbit* for Apple TV+.





Thanks for the Memories, '23!

So, the final weeks of the year have arrived, and just like you, we are all looking back at the highs and lows of 2023, and hope the new year will be a much

better time for all of us. Of course, we still have plenty of new shows, shorts and features to tell you about in this issue.

We have two big movies about our feathered friends sharing the cover this month. Our U.K. correspondent Rich Johnson had the great opportunity to visit the Aardman studio in Bristol a few months ago while the new movie *Chicken Run: Dawn of the Nugget* was still in production. You can read his interview with the film's talented director Sam Fell and his account of his trip in this issue.

Also taking wing this month is Illumination's much-anticipated new feature, *Migration*. Longtime friend of the magazine Michael Mallory spoke with the film's director Benjamin Renner, charting a course to the heart of this beautifully crafted family movie in our other cover story this month.

Naturally, it wouldn't be December without a few holiday-themed animated offerings. Our writer Jeff Spry had a great time chatting with Mike Roth, the brilliant director of the new Warner Bros. animated special *Merry Little Batman*. We are all very thankful that the movie was saved by the folks at Prime Video and we all get the chance to stream it this month. Let's hope the same good fate awaits *Coyote vs. Acme*, another great Warner Bros. title which was shelved recently thanks to the insidious tax write-off school of corporate creativity.

If you like your animated specials spiked with a touch of criminal genius, you will need to check out DreamWorks' new special *The Bad Guys: A Very Bad Holiday*. Across the pond, U.K. TV watchers get to enjoy *Tabby McTat* and *Mog's Christmas*, a couple of charming animated offerings about the adventures of two very different feline characters during the season of gifts, egg nog and mistletoe. Make sure you read our behind the scenes spotlights of these handsome productions.

On behalf of everyone at *Animation Magazine*, let me wish you a wonderful holiday season and a peaceful and happy new year. Let's hope a kinder, gentler and better world awaits us all in 2024. It would be wise to remember the words of the great Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Write it on your heart that every day is the best day in the year."

Ramin Zahed
Editor in Chief
ramin@animationmagazine.net

QUOTE OF THE MONTH



"I saw *Coyote vs. Acme* and it's delightful. Funny, charming, good physical comedy timing, with a surprising amount of heart. I hope several studios go after it so the world can see all the good work people did."

— *Spider-Verse* writer-producer Chris Miller, after attending a special screening of Warner Bros.' *Coyote vs. Acme*, which was shelved for a \$30 million tax write-off. The hybrid cartoon/live-action *Looney Tunes* movie is now reportedly being shopped to streaming outlets.

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FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

BEST ~~ANIMATED~~ FEATURE



THE ANIMATED FEATURE OF THE YEAR.

GENUINELY NECESSARY."

San Francisco Chronicle

"A VIVID CREATURE ALL ITS OWN.

At its heart, it's a pointed allegory about politicians who build their national profile on the backs of queer and transgender children. Nimona the character doesn't claim to speak for them, but does try to speak to them and to others grappling with the concept of *what it might feel like when your shell doesn't match your soul.*"

The New York Times

NIMONA



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ART OF BOOK!

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Animation Planner

December

1 A flurry of wintry family animation specials are unwrapped on Apple TV+ today, including **Frog & Toad: Christmas Eve**, **Shape Island: The Winter Blues** and **The Snoopy Show: Happiness Is Holiday Traditions**.

4 The fairies-in-training of **Dew Drop Diaries** discover new magical skills in S2, now on Netflix.

8 NorAm audiences can finally take in Hayao Miyazaki's latest masterpiece, **The Boy and the Heron**, through GKIDS. At home, families can tune in to cheerful holiday adventures: DC's Caped Crusader struggles with fatherhood in **Merry Little Batman** on Prime Video, from Warner Bros. Animation, while **Diary of a Wimpy Kid: Christmas Cabin Fever** delivers jolly, sometimes gross, laughs on Disney+.

9 The **Los Angeles Animation Festival (LAAF)** celebrates our favorite art form Saturday & Sunday in the City of Angels. [blog.laafest.com]

12 In another hemisphere, discover the latest in CG & interactive techniques at the **SIG-GRAPH Asia** conference and exhibition, through December 15. [asia.siggraph.org/2023]

14 Following the success of *One Piece*, Netflix drops its live-action series adaptation of hit manga **Yu Yu Hakusho**. Preliminary voting for the **96th Academy Awards** is open through Dec. 18.

15 An old Aardman favorite comes back deep fried in action movie gags and tenderized for your enjoyment as **Chicken Run: Dawn of the Nugget** debuts on Netflix.

21 Today's the day we find out the animated shorts and VFX showpieces that made the **Oscars Shortlists!**

22 Illumination's new original comedy-adventure **Migration** takes flight, accompanied by a short starring *Despicable Me* villain Vector, **Mooned!**



The Snoopy Show: Happiness Is Holiday Traditions



Chicken Run: Dawn of the Nugget



Dew Drop Diaries



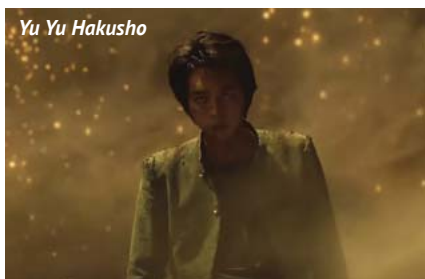
Migration



The Boy and the Heron

23 After a bit of a delay due to the Hollywood strikes, **Marvel's What If...? Season 2** brings more speculative surprises to Disney+.

31 It's **New Year's Eve!** Enjoy the holiday season and raise a glass of champagne, a mug of cocoa or your favorite sketching pencil to all the animated delights that await in 2024! ♦



Yu Yu Hakusho



Marvel's What If...?



BoJack Horseman

To get your company's events and products listed in this monthly calendar, please e-mail edit@animationmagazine.net.

FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION
BEST ANIMATED FEATURE

FRAME-BY-FRAME

“★★★★★
BRILLIANT AND UPROARIOUS.
A THRILLING SEQUEL WITH HUMOUR INSPIRED
BY THE GOLDEN AGE OF BRITISH COMICS.”

The Telegraph

“**EXCELLENT.**
VERY FUNNY, BRILLIANTLY CRAFTED
AND QUINTESSENTIAL AARDMAN.”

From the often very silly gags, to the madcap invention of the set pieces, it's a sequel that fans will savor.
It both looks like the first movie and also makes use of modern technology to augment the visuals.”

Digital Spy.

BFI LONDON
FILM FESTIVAL
OFFICIAL SELECTION 2023

★
AARDMAN
CHICKEN RUN
DAWN OF THE NUGGET



The Must-Have List

The Art of The Boy and the Heron

The official behind-the-scenes art book celebrating Studio Ghibli and director Hayao Miyazaki's latest critically-acclaimed masterpiece, comprising 336 pages of image boards, background paintings, characters sketches and scenery, as well as the completed script. Those who can read Japanese (or cross their fingers and hope for the best from a translation app) can read Miyazaki's original proposal and interviews with key creatives Yu Honda (animation director), Yoji Takeshige (art director), Okui (DP) and others. Or, simply enjoy being whisked away to another fantastical Ghibli world through the artwork alone! [Tokuma Shoten JP | ~\$30]



The Art of The Creator: Designs of Futures Past

Dive into 200+ hardbound pages of never-before-seen imagery, interviews and a full journey from script to screen of the stunning retro-futurist AI thriller. Film journo James Mottram is our guide, following *The Secrets of Tenet* and *Jurassic World: The Ultimate Visual History*. Commentary from director Gareth Edwards, production designer James Clyne and stars John David Washington, Gemma Chan, Allison Janney and Ken Watanabe bring the creative process to life, illustrated with concept artwork and production imagery that shows human talent remains, as yet, inimitable. [Insight Editions | \$75]

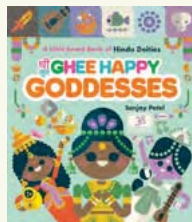


Star Trek: Lower Decks – Crew Handbook

The crew of the *U.S.S. Cerritos*, that fateful Starfleet vessel at the core of the hit Paramount+ adult comedy toon, offers insider tips to new recruits. The hilarious guide is penned by sci-fi author Chris Farnell, who also graced this dismal planet with the official *Doctor Who* joke book, *Knock! Knock! Who's There?* [Titan Books | \$29.95 | Dec. 19]



The Art of Walt Disney: From Mickey Mouse to the Magic Kingdoms and Beyond
Disney100 Celebration Edition
[Abrams | HC \$100]



Ghee Happy Goddesses

A Little Board Book of Hindu Deities, by Oscar-nominated Pixar alum Sanjay Patel.
[Chronicle Books | \$9]



Jujutsu Kaisen: The Official Anime Guide

Season 1
[VIZ Media | \$18]

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Mutant Mayhem

Bonus features: TEENage Mutant Ninja Turtles • The Mutant Uprising • New York, New York: The Visual World of *Mutant Mayhem* • Learn to Draw Leo
[Paramount | DVD \$20, BD \$25, 4K \$33 | Dec. 12]



Spirited Away: Live on Stage

Includes recordings of both cast performances at the 2022 opening run in Tokyo, led by Kanna Hashimoto and Mone Kamishiraishi as Chihiro.
[Shout! Factory | \$24]



PAW Patrol: The Mighty Movie

Bonus features: PAW-Somely Mighty Pups • A Totally PAW-Some Cast
[Paramount | DVD \$18, BD \$23 | Dec. 12]



Cat City

Deaf Crocodile brings another Hungarian animation experiment to light with this 1986 sci-fi animal crime tale by Béla Ternovszky. The release also includes three rare shorts from the director.
[Deaf Crocodile | \$35]



Shaun the Sheep: The Complete Series

Seven discs. Bonus features: *The Farmer's Llamas* • *The Flight Before Christmas* • *Mossy Bottom Shorts* • *Championsheeps* Shorts
[Shout! Factory | \$50 | Dec. 12]



My Dress-Up Darling: The Complete Season

Limited Edition, four discs. Bonus features: Dub Cast and Crew Q&A • Promo Videos • Textless Opening / Closing Songs
[Crunchyroll | \$90] ◆



—Mercedes Milligan



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Directed By Benjamin Renner

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The World ANIMATION Summit



STAR-STUDED GALA: From left, Maryann Garger, Sam Fell, Daniel Pemberton, Eric Beckman, Justin K. Thompson, David Jesteadt, Kemp Powers, Eric Bauza, Julien Borde, Shuzo John Shiota, Chris Buck, Jennifer Lee, Tara Sorensen, Floyd Norman, Marlon West, J. J. Johnson, Gina Shay, Joaquim Dos Santos and Walt Dohrn were among this year's Hall of Fame awardees and presenters.

Snapshots from the 2023 Summit

A look back at the highlights of this year's star-studded World Animation Summit

Last month, *Animation Magazine* hosted another successful edition of the **World Animation Summit** at the Garland hotel in N. Hollywood (Nov. 1-3). The star-studded event brought together some of the top creatives of the animation industry for three days of keynotes, panels and networking parties. Among the big highlights was this year's fantastic Hall of Fame awards gala, which was hosted by the brilliant, Emmy-winning actor **Eric Bauza** (voice of Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, Tweety Bird, Woody Woodpecker and many others).



This year's Hall of Fame honorees were:

🏆 **Hayao Miyazaki**

Co-Founder, Studio Ghibli
Director, *The Boy and the Heron* [Ghibli, GKIDS]
Lifetime Achievement Award

🏆 **Jennifer Lee**

Chief Creative Officer
Walt Disney Animation Studios

🏆 **Mediawan Kids & Family**

International Studio of the Year
President Julien Borde

🏆 **Joaquim Dos Santos, Kemp Powers, Justin K. Thompson**

Directors
Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse [Sony Pictures Animation]
New Vision Award

🏆 **Sam Fell**

Director
Chicken Run: Dawn of the Nugget [Aardman, Netflix]

🏆 **Floyd Norman**

Animator
Disney Legend

🏆 **Gina Shay**

Producer
Trolls Band Together [DreamWorks]

🏆 **Shuzo John Shiota**

President
Polygon Pictures

🏆 **Tara Sorensen**

Head of Children's Programming
Apple TV+



Animated Times: Clockwise from top left, *Leo* directors Robert Marianetti, (L) and David Wachtenheim; *Trolls Band Together* producer and awardee Gina Shay (L) and Paramount/Nickelodeon Animation president Ramsey Naito, Sony Pictures Animation SVP of publicity and digital Garth Burkhard, *Harvey* director Janice Nadeau (L) and NFB producer Marc Bertrand, *BoJack Horseman* director Mike Hollingsworth (L) and actor and awards host Eric Bauza, awardee Shuzo John Shiota, *Animation Magazine* president Jean Thoren (L) and Summit director Kim Derevlany.



Award Season Feature Panels: From left, directors Kirk DeMico (*Ruby Gillman, Teenage Kraken*), Joaquim Dos Santos, Kemp Powers and Justin K. Thompson (*Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse*), Sam Fell (*Chicken Run: Dawn of the Nugget*) and Troy Quane (*Nimona*) discussed the making of their movies.



View from the Top: Directors Chris Buck (*Wish*), Walt Dohrn (*Trolls Band Together*), Aaron Horvath and Michael Jelenic (*The Super Mario Bros. Movie*), Jeff Rowe (*Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Mutant Mayhem*), Peter Sohn (*Elemental*) and David Wachtenheim (*Leo*) talked about their craft at the Awards Contenders panel.



Apple TV+ Spotlight: A look at some of the excellent animated projects from the streamer included (standing top left) Rob Hoegee (*Frog and Toad*), Mac Barnett (*Shape Island*), Raymond Persi (*Snoopy Presents One-of-a-Kind Marcie*), Kelli Bixler (*Shape Island*), J.J. Johnson (*Jane*), Jon Klassen (*Shape Island*) and Drew Hodges (*Shape Island*), moderated by Ramin Zahed (seated left).



Toons for Grown-Ups: Our very topical adult animation panel featured journalist Jennifer Wolfe, Jane Wu (*Blue Eye Samurai*), Mike Cusack and Zach Hadel (*Smiling Friends*), Sean Buckelew (*Scavengers Reign*) and Steve Levy (*Krapopolis*, *Strange Planet*).

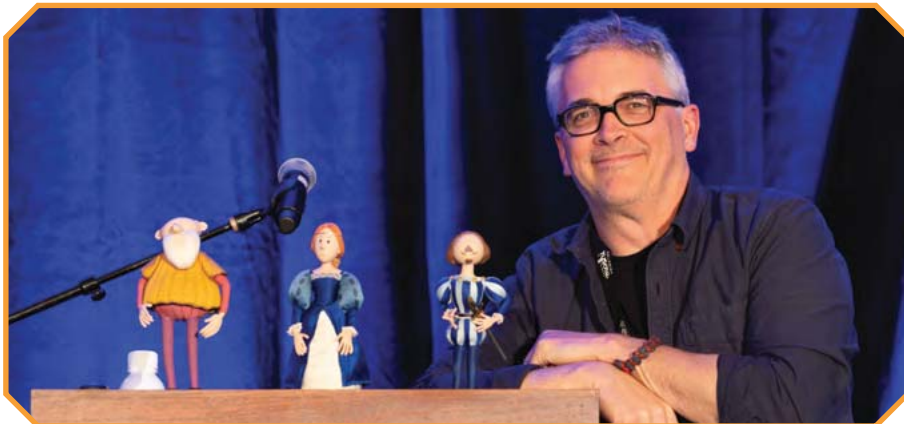


Preschool Paradise: From left, Rachel Larsen (*The Tiny Chef Show*), journalist Karen Idelson, Olubunmi Mia Olufemi (*Alma's Way*), Stephanie Simpson (*Mighty Monster Wheelies*), Tom Warburton (*Muppet Babies*) and Guy Toubes (*CoComelon Lane*) discussed some of the latest trends in animation for younger viewers.



Short-Form Champs: Our Award Season Shorts Panel featured, from left, Dan Abraham (*Once Upon a Studio*), Ethan Barrett (*Rosemary A.D.*), Flóra Anna Buda (*27*), Andreas Deja (*Mushka*) and John Musker (*I'm Hip*).

Check out some of the photos from this year's edition of the Hall of Fame awards gala, and inspiring panels, screenings and fun parties below: (All photos courtesy of Dana Fineman, Will Thoren and Tanita Ross-Cady.) A huge thanks to event director **Kim Derevlany** who made everything run so smoothly after many, many weeks of hard work and very long days! Make sure you mark your calendars for the 2024 edition of this popular event, which will take place Nov. 3-6. [animationmagazine.net/summit](https://www.animationmagazine.net/summit) ♦



CREATIVE KEYNOTES: The 2023 edition featured a star-studded line-up of keynote speakers, including, from top, Jim Capobianco (*The Inventor*), Peter Sohn (*Elemental*), Peter Gal (CCO, DreamWorks Animation TV), *Hazbin Hotel* creator Vivienne Medrano and Dan Abraham (*Once Upon a Studio*).



Wish director Chris Buck presented this year's Hall of Fame award to his *Frozen* colleague and Disney CCO Jennifer Lee.



Disney Legend Marlon West, *Spider-Verse* producer/writer Phil Lord and Polygon president Shuzo John Shiota smile for the cameras at the Hall of Fame gala.

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Keynote presenter Matthew A. Cherry, creator of *Young Love* and *Hair Love*, shared his animation journey with the audience.



POULTRY IN MOTION

Our U.K. correspondent visits the set of Aardman's delightful new animated movie, *Chicken Run: Dawn of the Nugget*.

- By Rich Johnson -



Aardman Animations' pitch-perfect *Chicken Run* — the beloved Bristol-based studio's first foray into feature films in 2000 — received terrific reviews and became the most successful stop-motion animated movie of all time, grossing \$227.8 million worldwide.

Directed by studio principals Peter Lord and Nick Park, the beautifully crafted feature offered a tale of female friendship and ingenuity while also delivering a suspenseful tale of survival and a fable about the fight against capitalism. Whereas the first was a breakout movie, the long-awaited sequel is a break-in — a comedic heist that leaves the post-World War II palette behind and leans more toward the fast-food color of America when it came to Britain in the 1960s.

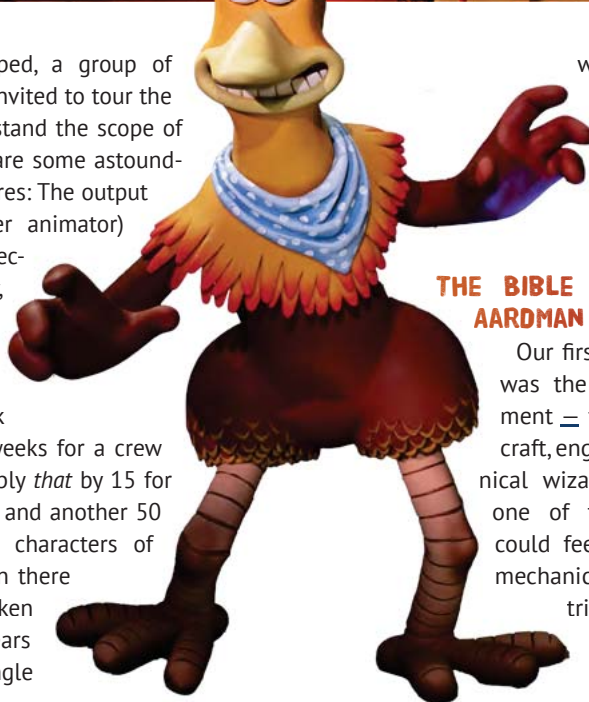
A few months ago, right before the six-year production and two-year animation journey of

the movie wrapped, a group of journalists were invited to tour the studio. To understand the scope of the sequel, here are some astounding facts and figures: The output of animation (per animator) was around one second each day, with 40 seconds taking roughly 18 weeks. A single puppet took between 30-50 weeks for a crew to work on. Multiply *that* by 15 for the hero puppets and another 50 for background characters of lesser detail. Then there are the sets: Chicken Island took two years to build and a single

week to take down. We only saw a glimpse of this incredible artistry behind the many curtains...

THE BIBLE ACCORDING TO AARDMAN

Our first stop on the tour was the puppetry department — the perfect mix of craft, engineering and technical wizardry. While lifting one of the puppets, you could feel the heft of the mechanics and see *many* intricate details. "The rubber feathers are all of varied

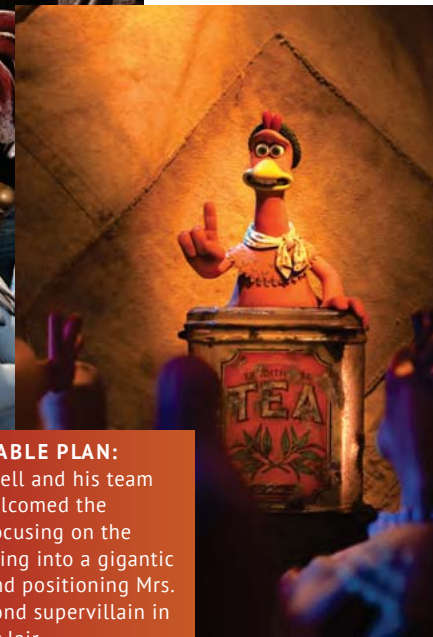


'I'm quite impatient, so working on these films is a lesson on slow-mo. Every choice is crucial as it is magnified through animation.'

- Director Sam Fell



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AN IM-PECK-ABLE PLAN:

Director Sam Fell and his team at Aardman welcomed the challenge of focusing on the chickens breaking into a gigantic factory farm and positioning Mrs. Tweedy as a Bond supervillain in a high-security lair.

size," said head of puppets Kate Anderson. "This randomization is applied before the 3D mold is printed, and it takes a week to paint all the plumage," she explained. "Laika uses color 3D printers which enables them to play with different materials, but we remain traditionally 'Aardman' with plasticine heads and beaks." This is where the *character* details are captured and where the studio has mastered a fine balance between art and efficiency.

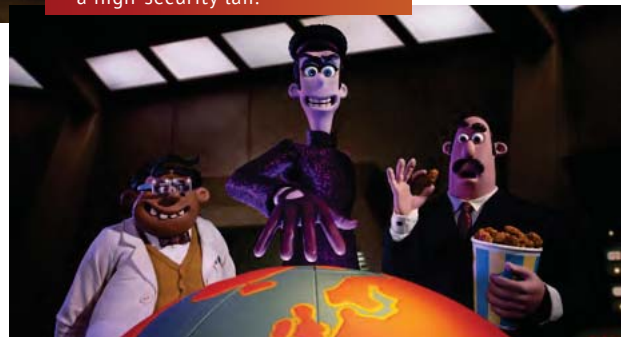
Next was the animation floor, a huge studio space set up like a village of curtained cubicles. We were introduced to Ian Whitlock, whose job was overseeing the team of animators to maintain a seamless continuity. "I worked on the first movie and had the original notes from Peter Lord as a reference, which helped put a 'character bible' together. This includes an expression sheet and walk cycles that work as a shorthand, especially for the director, Sam Fell, [to communicate] with myself and the animators." Panning around Whitlock's set piece, there was a box of various faces and mouths nearby. "Every tweak of a beak, every decision, is about focusing on the performanc-

es through simplification. We keep it punchy. That's the Aardman style."

Animator Laura Tofarides — who trained at the Aardman Academy — took us through the stop-motion process in more detail. "We act everything out for Sam to look at in an edit. Once the right emotion is captured, I'll test for half a day with shortcut movements." She proceeded to move one of the mouths a fraction, then cranked a handle under the table that lends free body movement to the background characters. All the while, on her monitor, she had Dragonframe open: a stop-motion interface that lets her toggle between an overlay of the test run (as a guide) and the final animation. "After reading the character bible, we then had three months of preparation time before we were set loose. You're animating for eight to nine hours a day, so you are learning and perfecting the craft constantly."

FOIL AND FUN-LAND

Behind the next curtain, we saw director of photography Charles Copping crumpling foil



around a cylinder. Low-tech and in-camera, it slowly turns and reflects the illusion of flames. The film's "color script" that runs throughout the production becomes more and more noticeable, even right through to one of the final parts of the tour that placed supervising art director Matt Perry springing before us — "Ta-da!" — as he introduced us all to what appeared to be a stairway to heaven: a small portion of Fun-Land that resembles a utopian theme park which (inevitably) turns the chickens into nuggets.

By the time we visited, the original set was long gone; because the set was created at scale, it was unable to physically fit into the building and therefore filmed in sections and



TRIUMPHANT TRIO: Exec producer Nick Park, director Sam Fell and Aardman co-founder Peter Lord pose with their feathered friends.

Chicken Bytes

- Nick Park made a small voice cameo in the original *Chicken Run*, performing the clucks Mr. Tweedy hears when he shines his torch on a teapot the chickens have disguised as a hen.
- Factoring in alternative scenes and changes, it took more than 100,000 storyboards for the production.
- The Aardman crew working on *Dawn of the Nugget* totaled around 350 people, while the production comprised 45 units at its peak.
- The film contains around 1,400 shots in total, of which only 28 are fully computer generated. The longest shot is the opening pan across Chicken Island, which is 784 frames, or 32.67 seconds. It took 80 working days to shoot the animation.
- More than 800 chicken wings were made for the production, while over 150,000 feathers had to be hand painted. Most puppets have a set of 14 mouths, but Molly had the largest mouth set at 24. With 16 Molly puppets made in total, there were 384 Molly mouths created for *Dawn of the Nugget*.
- To prevent the chicken puppets from having too much of a sheen on camera, each one had finely sifted icing sugar puffed onto its surface, creating an even matte effect.
- Crushed walnut shells were used to create road surfaces in the film, while the soil texture on the chicken village set was made from recycled fallen leaves from a leylandii tree outside the studio.
- A total of 119 sets were built for the production, along with 130 animatable props, including a corn conveyor and a windmill.
- The popcorn silo sequence required 75 kilograms of popcorn kernels – equivalent to the weight of 25 real chickens.
- The numbers on the collars worn by some of the characters have special significance. The “Chosen Chicken” has “314,” as in 3.14 – the value of pi; Frizzle’s collar has “505,” which represents “SOS”; and Ginger’s collar has “983”: “9” for chronological storytelling and “83” representing International Women’s Day (March 8).
- If you look closely during the film’s final shot, you will spot a significant Easter egg: an imposter chicken in the form of the nefarious penguin Feathers McGraw, from the second *Wallace & Gromit* adventure, *The Wrong Trousers*.

Source: Aardman Animations

at various sizes. “We’re embracing new technology, such as virtual production so we can have the digital background behind the sets in real time to help with composition.” Due to the various scales of each composited shot, Aardman had to find new ways of programming moves that matched the scale of another larger set piece. This “match moving” technique allowed for various CGI segments (within different planes of view) to be inserted into the live-action footage, which helped align with the correct positioning, scale, orientation and motion relative to the photographed objects in the shot. “It has taken everything the studio has learned over the past 50 years from the traditional to the high tech.”

CHICKEN WRAP

Director Sam Fell entered for lunch. Having worked on *Flushed Away* and Laika’s *ParaNorman*, he was onboard with the *Chicken Run* sequel from the onset, taking great pride in casting the right animators. “This is a big deal. It’s a legacy movie for Aardman,” Fell said.

He went on to highlight the phenomenal continuity at the heart of the studio’s work. “They have a strong foundation, so people can spend their *whole lives* making great work here. It’s wonderful, as everyone is *completely* invested in these characters. They know how they work, so there’s something about the souls of the chickens that is still in the hearts and minds of the crew.”

This foundation is more than evident during the visit, speaking to everyone from veterans to graduates of the Aardman Acade-



WINGS AND PRAYERS: More than 800 chicken wings were made for the production and over 150,000 feathers had to be hand painted.

my. They are a family in the truest sense of the word. “*Dawn of the Nugget* is a major milestone for the studio, and because *Chicken Run* was such a massive film for them, this is like handling the family silver. It’s incredibly important to the whole studio.”

Most of us were still eating our chicken wraps – (what?) – when Fell then picked up a pencil

CONTINUED ON PAGE 18

“AN **EXCITING THRILL RIDE THROUGH
SOME OF THE MOST BELOVED REALMS
IN THE GAMING WORLD.”**

Lex Briscuso, **THE WRAP**

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'*Chicken Run* was a giant step for us as a studio. To tell a feature-length story with our technique of stop-motion clay animation required us to move from our little cottage industry to this industrial scale.'

- Exec producer Nick Park



FARM AND FUNCTION: A total of 119 sets were built for the production, along with 130 animatable props, including a corn conveyor and a windmill, at Aardman's studio.



and began sketching, a demonstration of his mind being in several places at once. He touched upon his love of stop motion and what separates it from other forms of animation. "For me, it's the direct involvement of the human hand and eye. You can walk around and see the progress on set; the 'texture of things.' You find some animators polishing out their thumbprints and I'm immediately: 'Leave your thumbprints in there!'" He paused, pencil scratching on paper. "I'm quite impatient, so working on these films is a lesson on slow-mo. Every choice is crucial as it is magnified through animation. There are thousands of decisions to make from the color script to the shapes of things to rehearsing with the animators."

Fell moved on to the story, which took two years to peck into shape. "An integral part of kick-starting the sequel was: 'Do they continue hiding from the world or help others?'" he explained. "Of course, a lot has happened since the first film was made — they got the recipe right — *Chicken Run* brilliantly navigated a line between the dark drama of a story about chickens facing certain death, and comedy and lightness and fun. Plus, the craft was incredible. The way

they executed it was, and still is, remarkable. In terms of story, sure, there were strong female characters, but as with those capitalist undertones of the first film, now there are the ecological elements. This is not only the next chapter of Ginger's story, but, most importantly, this is truly a film of *now*

The audiences of the original movie in 2000 now likely have their own hatchlings and eagerly await this next adventure that sees Ginger (Thandiwe Newton) settled in a peaceful island sanctuary away from the dangers of the outside world. Now hitched to Rocky (Zachary Levi), they've hatched Molly (Bella Ramsey). But, with a new deadly threat to chicken-kind on the mainland, Ginger and her faithful team must risk the freedom they fought so hard for after their death-defying escape from Tweedy's Farm. Not only has Mrs. Tweedy (Miranda Richardson) survived but she's also returned to her

wicked ways: She has devised a new and terrible kind of fast food — the chicken nugget. "It's her ultimate revenge on chickens to bring this devastation on them over the generations," said Fell. "From a chicken's point of view, the creation of the world's first chicken nugget is an apocalyptic event."

While the film plays with the utopian dream and dystopian nightmare, it manages to pay homage to everything from *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes*, *The Truman Show*, Gerry Anderson to Bond and *Mission: Impossible*-level action. Fun for everyone, indeed. ♦

Aardman's *Chicken Run: Dawn of the Nugget* arrives on Netflix on December 15.

'For the original movie, I pitched "The Great Escape with chickens," which I maintain is the greatest pitch in movie history.'

- Exec producer Peter Lord

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Those Magnificent Mallards

Benjamin Renner and Colin Stimpson take us behind the scenes of Illumination's *Migration*, which is definitely not just for the birds!

- By Michael Mallory -



There's a good reason for the low human character quotient in Universal and Illumination's sparkling new holiday release *Migration*. The film depicts the misadventures of a nuclear duck family that abandons the safety and security of its home pond to explore the larger world. "We wanted to shift the point of view and treat humans the way ducks would probably perceive us," says Benjamin Renner, *Migration*'s director and co-writer (with *School of Rock* writer and *White Lotus* creator Mike White). "The humans are treated like animals in the movie, in that only the birds understand each other." This is not to say that the audience will not understand the birds, which are eminently relatable to anyone who has ever been part of a family.

In one sense, the "leaving home" theme of *Migration* is an example of art imitating life. The French-born Renner, whose 2012 film *Ernest & Celestine* garnered an Oscar nomination for Best Animated Feature, confesses that he had to be prodded out of his comfort zone to take on a major CGI production.

"I felt very comfortable working on very small, very modest, hand-drawn animation in France," Renner says. "[Producer] Chris Meledandri got in touch with me and asked me to meet him, and I felt there was a misunderstanding in the sense that he's going to realize that I have nothing to do with big-budget Hollywood movies." But as the two chatted about real-life subjects — family, relationships, friends — Renner felt he might have

something to offer and agreed to work on storyboards. Eventually, Meledandri, who was impressed with Renner's filmmaking sensibility, offered him the director's chair. "I told Chris, 'I've never done this before, but we can try, and if it goes wrong you can ask me to leave the studio.' Five years later, he didn't fire me, so I guess he was happy with my work."

Learning to Fly

For the film's Mallard family, however, things definitely go wrong throughout the course of their first family adventure. Doting father Mack (voiced Kumail Nanjiani) and loving mom Pam (Elizabeth Banks) will do anything for their children — adolescent Dax (Caspar Jennings) and tiny, innocent duckling



'I kept telling [the crew], "I don't want to be able to count the number of leaves on the trees." The animation is making you believe everything, so as long as it's well animated, it's going to work.'

- Director Benjamin Renner



BIG DUCK ENERGY:

According to the film's creative team, *Migration* is definitely not just a kids' movie. Mike White has pointed out that the movie has some wistfulness and parental themes that transcend children's films, but it also has a visual zaniness that kids will respond to.



Gwen (Tresi Gazal) — but each parent has a wildly different philosophy. Risk-averse Mack preaches that danger lurks anywhere outside the pond, while Pam, frustrated by their play-it-safe lifestyle, wants to break out and expose her kids to the real world.

Eventually, Mack is reluctantly pressed into leading his flock, which includes the equally sedentary Uncle Dan (Danny DeVito), on their first migration. The journey takes them first to a foreboding Southern bayou, then to intimidating and cacophonous Manhattan where they encounter a posse of pigeons led by the crusty, street-wise Chump (Awkwafina) and run afoul (or maybe afowl) of an insanely vin-



LIKE LIFE: Production designer Colin Stimpson points out that the film's color palette was inspired by the natural colors seen in nature documentaries while his trip to New York in the fall informed *Migration's* Big City sequence.



dictive human Chef whose specialty is *duck à l'orange*. After freeing the Chef's pet scarlet macaw (Keegan-Michael Key) from his cage, the grateful parrot offers to lead them to his native Jamaica. But even then, the family's troubles are far from over, and they learn more about each other and bond like never before in the process.

Part of Meledandri's pitch to Renner included the opportunity to work with the studio's Paris-based animation team. "Illumination has such a huge roster of talented artists, and the animation team is really, really strong," Renner says, crediting the team with easing his transition from 2D to big digital filmmaking. "I've always mixed hand-drawn and computer, so I was not afraid of working on it," he says, "but I had never done 3D before, especially on that scale. The people from the studio all told me, 'We'll be there to help you tell the story; you ask and we'll provide.'"

Renner established a similarly easy working relationship with co-director Guylo Homsy, an

Illumination veteran who worked in layout on *Sing*, *Sing 2* and *The Grinch*. "Guylo arrived on the project a year-and-a-half after I started," he says. "And I was basically taking care of the storyboard. He was the guy who could translate the storyboards into the camera. He was experimenting with the camera a lot and with the layout team, and he kept telling me, 'I'm not very good with coming up with stories, but I'm great at telling them.' If you see great shots, he was the one in charge of it."

Special care was taken with the film's vibrant color palettes, according to production designer Colin Stimpson, whose many animation credits include *The Secret Life of Pets*, *The Grinch* and *The Emperor's New Groove*. "Our main inspiration was nature," he says. "In previous Illumination films we used heightened color palettes, but with *Migration* we wanted our colors to be more natural, much more like those seen in nature documentaries." Stimpson's trip to New York in the autumn informed the Big City sequence, though none of the crew

was sent to Jamaica to research the scenes set there. "We studied [Jamaica] carefully, however," he says, "and were very careful not to slip into caricature." The island's Blue Mountains inspired the setting for the Mallards' arrival.

By contrast, the look of the sequence in which the family is sheltered for the night by a sinister heron named Erin (voiced by Carol Kane) and her even more baleful mate came from a surprising source. "The herons' shack is dark, damp and scary, so for the lighting we were inspired by the [1920] German Expressionistic movie *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*," Stimpson reveals. "It was a lot of fun to work on and is my favorite sequence in the film."

Says Renner of the sequence: "Chris allowed me to make that little horror movie in the film and then told me, 'Just make sure that we can breathe after that and feel exhilarated, because we need that.'" That directive led to a much lighter and whimsical sequence showing the migrating Mallards flying through clouds and using them as ammo in an im-

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'Ducks are strange, complex looking creatures and they all look alike! Designing characters that were original to look at as well as appealing and uniquely individual as difficult.'

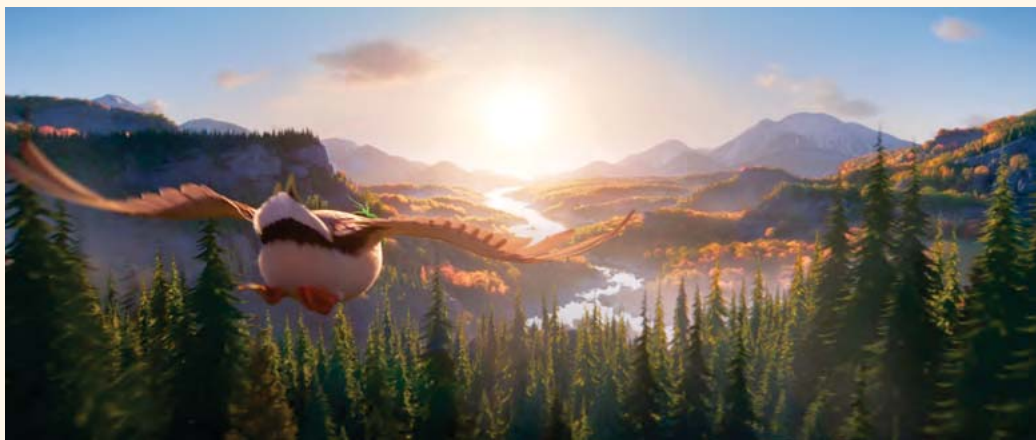
- Production designer Colin Stimpson



promptu snowball fight. Says Renner, "I had to do a few back-and-forth trips to Los Angeles [from Illumination's Paris studio] and when it's cloudy and gray, and the plane goes above the clouds, it really amazed me. I thought, 'OK, that's a great feeling, let's try to replicate that.'"

In an ideal world, Renner would have liked to record his multi-award-winning/nominated voice cast together or in pairs, but the state of the world in the 2020s made it impractical. "COVID was in the middle of [production]," he says. "I remember that Elizabeth Banks was a little frustrated by [remote recording] but [we] did our best to feed her the lines and made her listen to her with Kumail, and she was impressed by the feeling that they were really talking to each other."

But as any experienced film actor will tell you, acting for the camera happens through the eyes. The characters in *Migration* have enormous, cue-ball eyes, with tiny pupils that the animators moved with very subtle precision to convey a wealth of expression and emotion. "During production people were like, 'Really? Eyes that big and this little dot in the middle?'" Renner says. "But it's just the way I draw." The overall design of the ducks was the film's biggest challenge, notes Stimpson. "Ducks are strange, complex-looking creatures and they all look alike!" he states. "De-



signing characters that were original to look at as well as appealing and uniquely individual was difficult."

An even greater achievement was merging, without visual disconnect, the very cartoony characters into stunningly rendered, realistic-looking environments that are expansive enough to allow for long flying shots. "We wanted to make sure that the backgrounds did not overpower the characters with detail," Stimpson says. "We found ways to simplify the backgrounds, often simplifying the shadows so that the texture was only seen in the light areas. We used a narrow depth of field so that the characters were the only things in focus." Adds Renner, "I kept telling [the crew], 'I don't

want to be able to count the number of leaves on the trees.' The animation is making you believe everything, so as long as it's well animated, it's going to work."

Boasting a lush, classic Hollywood-style score by animated feature veteran John Powell, *Migration* takes wing Dec. 22, but given the nature of the animated film biz, the obvious question is whether plans for a sequel have already been whispered. "Not yet," Renner says. "I would be happy to work again for Illumination, but on a film that has a story I'm passionate enough about to work for another five years." ♦

Universal/Illumination's *Migration* will be released in U.S. theaters on December 22.

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A Dark Knight's Yuletide

Director Mike Roth pays homage to Ronald Searle and previous incarnations of the superhero in the new Prime Video feature, *Merry Little Batman*.

- By Jeff Spry -



The sparkly season of sleigh bells might not be immediately associated with the brooding shadow of the Dark Knight. Yet, avid comic book fans know that there's long been a traditional relationship and unique juxtaposition between Batman and Christmas.

To further entrench that fusion of heroes and holidays, Amazon's Prime Video is wrapping up and delivering *Merry Little Batman*, a festive animated family film directed by Mike Roth (*Regular Show*) and based on a charming screenplay written by Morgan Evans (*Teen Titans Go!*) and Jase Ricci (*Batman: The Doom That Came to Gotham*).

This storyline finds Damian Wayne, Bruce's young son, left by himself in the stately Wayne Manor on Christmas Eve, where he transforms into "Little Batman" to defend his domicile and the rest of Gotham City from invasive supervillains attempting to ruin all yuletide revelries.

Produced by Warner Bros. Animation, *Merry Little Batman* features a top-notch voice cast that

includes Yonas Kibreab (*Pupstruction*, *Sweet Tooth*) as Damian, with Luke Wilson (*Fired on Mars*, *Star-girl*), James Cromwell (*Star Trek: First Contact*, *Succession*) and David Hornsby (*DC Super Hero Girls*).

The project's move from a cozy nest at DC's parent company, Warner Bros. Discovery (and its Max streaming service), to Amazon is part of CEO David Zaslav's plan to license content out to other prominent platforms. With stylized character designs exhibiting a retro storybook look and a whimsical tone that encourages family viewing, *Merry Little Batman* hopes to become an annual Christmastime classic akin to 1990's *Home Alone*.

"I came to Warner Bros. on an overall deal," Roth tells *Animation Magazine*. "Sammy Perlmutter brought me on, and I was working on a couple different movie projects at the time when Sammy called me to ask if I liked Batman and artist Ron Searle. I told him I love Batman and Ron Searle. So, he said, 'What if we do a Batman movie with a Ron Searle design and a Christmas theme?' They teamed

me up with Morgan Evans and we started developing this new world."

Roth was well aware of Batman's 85-year legacy and how essential it would be to stay true to canon and create a script that honors Batman history, but also still make it a Christmas movie.

"That informed a lot of design decisions and what we were trying to do. We wanted something that felt like a Christmas storybook, so that informed our color palette. We went with a sketchier line for the characters and the backgrounds."

Merry Little Batman has a distinctive design and shape language influenced by seminal British illustrator and satirical cartoonist Ron Searle and his award-winning sketches and drawings. Fans might be unaccustomed to seeing Batman and his rogues' gallery portrayed in this extreme fashion, but it's all part of the mercurial aspect of the Dark Knight's enduring popularity.

"We needed it to have this Christmassy



'We have a very unique Joker. The whole world is seen through the lens of Damian, who's a child. We designed the movie so it's like a little kid in this really big world.'

- Director Mike Roth



DAMIAN WAYNE, HOME ALONE: Director and producer Mike Roth wanted to tell the story through the eyes of a child because it was set in Christmas after all. "The idea of a teeny little kid in this huge city aspiring to become like his dad was a fun starting point," he says.



theme, and there's something about Ron Searle's drawings that make you think of old-timey Christmas material," Roth adds. "It's a very different look and a different approach. We wanted something that was very four-quadrant. Something that was fun for kids and fun for grandparents. We also have head nods to a wide range of Batman through the ages. It includes some Batman stuff from the '30s, a couple of Easter eggs from Batman '66 and the Bruce Timm era. So, I think there's a lot of fun stuff in there for everybody. We even have [comic book artist and editor] Carmine Infantino in it. We have his *actual* voice. I'm friends with his nephew and he gave me some of his interviews. So, I sifted through them and found a line that would work for a scene and then we did a design of Carmine. That's his real voice, post-mortem, in the movie."

The creative team's world-building process for this spirited Batman tale was constantly driven by the fact that this wasn't just about Batman's usual crime-fighting activities, since he's now a busy single dad trying to raise his son.

"For the first time in his history, Batman is a helicopter dad," says Roth. "He's got a young 8-year-old son and he's taking all his Batman energy and he's put it into raising his child. So those Ron Searle designs service that and, also, the kind of humor we wanted to pull in. Because those drawings are sort of rough and

raw. They bring an element of grit to it, which I think is really important for the Batman universe. When you think of Gotham you think of this gritty, visceral place and that loose Searle-like style got us there. It was a really great blending of the two worlds. Plus, it's just interesting to see Batman in a different way. This design sensibility is the hook of this world and this project. Those designs are enticing, and you want to see more."

Art director Guillaume Fesquet was responsible for most of *Merry Little Batman's* preliminary sketches, aided by Daby Zainab Faïdhi, who worked alongside Fesquet to distill down the final style.

"As a former architect, Daby came in with a lot of design principles," Roth notes. "She was instrumental in finding the kind of look and feel and colors of the backgrounds. The movie is really beautiful to look at. We used two overseas animated studios for the 2D animation. One was Giggiebug and they're located in Helsinki, Finland. The other one is Doghead Animation in Florence, Italy. They're both amazing studios."

"In so many ways, this was a passion project for everybody," he adds. "It was so much fun to live in this world and draw these characters. It's very rare that you get to work with a Searle-type of design sensibility in the States; it's more of a European style. Giggiebug and Doghead went above and beyond and put their

souls into the animation, and it shows when you see the finished product.

Roth hoped to make something that was a true Christmas story – something that could be perennial and touches all generations with a snowstorm of superhero magic and mayhem.

"Ideally, you hope that children watching it today will one day show it to their kids and [that] the project lives that long," he says. "I think people will be pumped, but you never know with these things. I grew up with the '66 Batman and I was a teenager when the Tim Burton *Batman* came out. Batman has 85 years of history, and we get to add a page to that, which is an important thing. We also had an incredible vocal cast and a great composer with Patrick Stump from Fall Out Boy."

When asked about his favorite part of the movie, Roth says it's the Joker. "We have a very unique Joker," he notes. "The whole world is seen through the lens of Damian, who's a child. We designed the movie so it's like a little kid in this really big world. We wanted a Joker that felt dangerous and scary, but also like a child. He's all over the place. I've been a fan of all the Batman iterations, so for me to be asked to do a Batman project is a pinch-yourself-and-wake-up moment. It's been a really special experience." ♦

***Merry Little Batman* premieres exclusively on Prime Video on December 8.**

Time Passages

Director Tomohisa Taguchi tackles serious issues in his fantasy
The Tunnel to Summer, the Exit to Goodbyes.

- By Charles Solomon -



Writer-director Tomohisa Taguchi's *The Tunnel to Summer, the Exit to Goodbyes* (streaming on HiDive), which won the Paul Grimault Award this year at Annecy, is a striking mixture of fantasy-adventure and romance that tackles serious issues. The hero and heroine are believable teenagers who have been emotionally damaged by harsh experiences that American animated characters seldom, if ever, encounter. The film is based on the light novel of the same name by Mei Hachimoku (available in English).

"Ryoichiro Matsuo-san, a producer from CLAP studio, and I were developing an original project; when it did not get through, I was handed *The Tunnel to Summer, the Exit to Goodbyes*," Taguchi explains. "I had been making action movies for most of my career, and I wanted to make a story that focused on purely human drama. This story has protagonists settling with his/her past and broken love. I thought these elements would make this title different from other animated features."

Taguchi, whose credits range from *Bleach: Thousand-Year Blood War* to *Digimon Adventure 02: The Beginning*, wrote the screenplay, storyboarded and directed the film, trimming

its rambling narrative and tightening its focus on the main characters. He discussed the creation of *Tunnel to Summer* in a recent interview conducted via email.

The Right Length

"The producers wanted something around 60 minutes long, but Matsuo-san negotiated it to 70 minutes before we went into production (the film is 76 minutes long)," Taguchi says. "We had to choose episodes in the novel to make the story work in the fixed time. I decided to focus on Kaoru and Anzu. We reshaped the original novel to make the narrative stronger and condensed it so the story can be fully experienced as one movie."

High school student Kaoru Tono meets Anzu Hanashiro, the new transfer from Tokyo, at a rail stop near Kozaki, a small town so far out in the boondocks that commuter train service is frequently disrupted by accidents with deer and wild boars. Anzu is carrying a package she's trying to protect from the rain, so Kaoru insists she take his umbrella. But the characters' emotional baggage far outweighs their physical burdens.

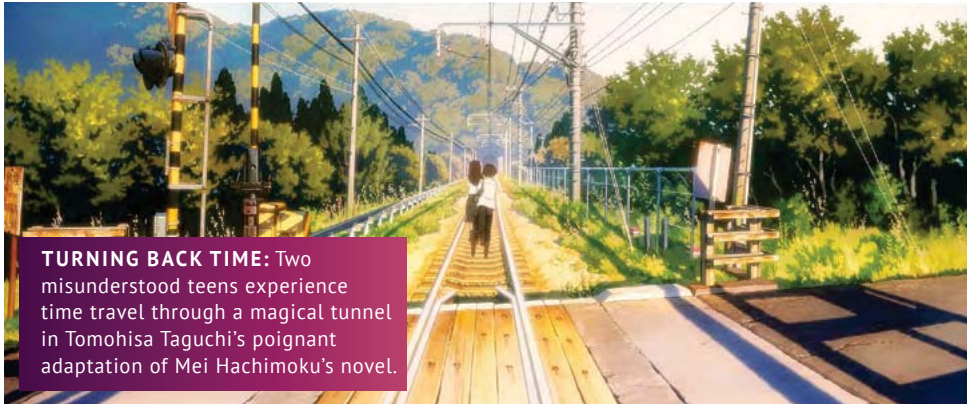
Kaoru's adored little sister Karen died when she fell from a tree while trying to catch a rhinoceros beetle for him. Kaoru's mother left. His hard-drinking father yells at Kaoru, blaming him for Karen's death. Kaoru is an alienated, withdrawn young man whom Taguchi





'I wanted to make a story that focused on purely human drama. This story has protagonists settling with his/her past and broken love. I thought these elements would make this title different from other animated features.'

- Writer-director Tomohisa Taguchi



TURNING BACK TIME: Two misunderstood teens experience time travel through a magical tunnel in Tomohisa Taguchi's poignant adaptation of Mei Hachimoku's novel.

makes into a sympathetic character.

"In Japan, many stories (especially in anime) have repressed heroes," Taguchi explains. "I think it is linked to the history and culture of Japan. But repression is universal. Anybody can experience times when they find life is hard and feel very desperate. That's why I thought viewers could relate to a repressed protagonist."

"The movie develops from Kaoru's perspective, so you don't really have a lot of scenes about his father," he continues. "But the original novel hints that the father had a lot of inner struggles. Parents and children [have] different personalities. If one side forgets that and tries to control or shut down the other, the relationship might go bad. In order to face the 'other,' you must first face yourself."

Anzu left her parents to follow her beloved grandfather's example and become a manga artist. He never achieved success in the industry and had to rely on Anzu's parents for money; now, they want their daughter to choose a more stable career. Although she's insecure about her talent, Anzu still refused to deny her artistic nature and moved into an apartment in Kozaki that once belonged to an uncle. Anzu is even more withdrawn

than Kaoru: She ignores her new classmates and reads her grandfather's manga.

But she's a complex character who has little in common with the socially maladroitness, math whiz girls in recent American animated features. When class mean girl Koharu Kawasaki harasses her, Anzu punches out the bully and calmly returns to her reading. Although he's shocked at her violent outburst, Kaoru recognizes Anzu's talent. He encourages her to keep drawing and to submit her work to publishers. She sees how deeply the loss of his sister wounded Kaoru and draws him out of his shell — a process he doesn't always enjoy.

"I believe human beings have multilayered personalities," Taguchi says. "I wanted to express Anzu's strong side and her sensitive, fragile side seamlessly. I hope the viewers can relate to her by not showing her as a stereotypical strong woman, but a multilayered human being."

While walking along the railroad tracks, Kaoru stumbles onto the Urashima Tunnel, a reference to "Urashima Taro," Japan's "Rip Van Winkle" story.

The Tunnel can grant wishes — but at a price. Time is so condensed within the Tunnel that a few seconds inside equals hours in the real world. The first time Kaoru enters, he

thinks he's spent an hour or two there, only to discover he missed a week of school, worrying his best friend and upsetting his father.

To explore the Tunnel thoroughly and find what someone is looking for could take years or even decades. Anzu wants the lost manga pages that link her to her grandfather; Kaoru wants to bring his sister back to life. As they explore and test the tunnel, an unexpected romance develops.

Hachimoku's Urashima Tunnel featured a line of eerie *torii* gates "colored an off-white that was almost the pigment of human bones." Taguchi and his artists reimagined it as a glittering fantasy lined with maple trees whose trunks seem to be decorated with old greeting cards.

A Beautiful Entrance

"The tunnel described in the original novel was horrific; we tried to make it into a stunning visual since it would be one of the key scenes in the movie," he says. "I presented the basic idea, and the background artists touched it up. In Japan, the great manga artist Fujiko Fujio is known for the concept of *sukoshi fushigi* (literally "a little strange or marvelous"); I aimed to create the tunnel along those lines, which became what we have in the film."

Taguchi was surprised to win the Grimault Award and hopes to continue reaching audiences beyond Japan. "I couldn't believe it when the title of our movie was announced at the Annecy festival," he says. "It was a great honor, and I was very happy to receive it. I was looking to a Japanese audience when I was making the movie. But attending the Annecy festival made me want to look to the larger world outside Japan. I hope to make more films that will reach more people who live far, far away. ♦

***The Tunnel to Summer, the Exit of Goodbyes* screened in U.S. theaters in early November. It is now available for purchase via digital download or VOD rental from platforms including Prime Video. The film will be released on SVOD on HIDIVE and on Blu-ray by Sentai in early January.**





Coming Attractions!

30 Animated Movies to Look Forward to in 2024



As we enter the final weeks of the year, we thought it would be a good idea to take a sneak peek at some of the biggest animated movies coming in 2024. Of course, the “official” release dates of these titles are bound to change, especially due to delays resulting from the actors strike in Hollywood. Just consider this a relatively reliable road map of what we can look forward to in the next 12 months!

THE DAY THE EARTH BLEW UP: A LOONEY TUNES MOVIE.

Daffy Duck and Porky Pig join forces to save the world from aliens in this first 2D-animated Looney Tunes movie made for the big screen. Directed by Peter Browngardt (*Looney Tunes Cartoons*).

Warner Bros. Animation



DRAGONKEEPER. Directed by Salvador Simó (*Buñuel in the Labyrinth*

of the Turtles), this Spanish-Chinese co-pro centers on an orphaned slave girl in ancient China named Ping who befriends one of the last imperial dragons. With the voices of Bill Nighy, Bill Bailey, Anthony Howell and Mayalinee Griffiths. **SF Films Intl.**



DESPICABLE ME 4. Evil mastermind Gru and the adorable Minions are back for another installment in the popular franchise. With the voices of Steve Carell, Kristen Wiig, Miranda Cosgrove and Steve Coogan. Directed by Patrick Delage, Chris Renaud. **Illumination/Universal; July 3**



FIXED. When our canine hero Bull (voiced by Adam DeVine) realizes that he's going to be neutered the following morning, his friends treat him to one last day of fun before his operation. Animation icon Genndy Tartakovsky directs this R-rated 2D-animated comedy. With Idris Elba, Kathryn Hahn and Fred Armisen. **Sony Pictures Animation/New Line Cinema**



DORAEMON: NOBITA'S EARTH SYMPHONY. In this musically themed outing, Doraemon and friends go on an adventure to meet new friends, connect with people through music and save the world from a major disaster. Kazuaki Imai directs this 42nd film in the franchise. **Toho/Shin Ei; March**



THE GARFIELD MOVIE. Mark Dindal (*The Emperor's New Groove*) is directing this CG-animated pic based on Jim Davis' lazy, lasagna-loving tabby cat. Chris Pratt voices the feline hero, alongside Samuel L. Jackson, Nicholas Hoult, Cecily Strong, Hannah Waddingham, Brett Goldstein, Bowen Yang and Ving Rhames. **Sony/Alcon/DNEG; May 24**



COMING SOON

GIANTS OF LA MANCHA. Alfonso, the 11-year-old heir of Don Quixote, and his three imaginary rabbit friends try to save their beloved town of La Mancha from a huge storm. Directed by Gonzalo Gutierrez. **GF Films/Studio 100 Media/GG VFX/Studio Isar/3 Doubles**



HAROLD AND THE PURPLE CRAYON. The popular children's book about a boy and his adventures with a magical crayon comes to life in a hybrid live-action and animated movie, directed by Carlos Saldanha (*Ice Age* and *Rio* movies, *Ferdinand*). With Zachary Levi, Lil Rel Howery and Zoey Deschanel. **Sony/Columbia; Aug. 2**



THE IMAGINARY. Directed by Yoshiyuki Momose, this much-anticipated movie is based on A.F. Harrold's novel about a young girl named Amanda who is coping with emotional loss and a world of invisible imaginary characters who are doomed to be destroyed when they're forgotten. **Studio Ponoc; Dec. 15, 2023 (Japan), TBA 2024 (U.S.)**



IN YOUR DREAMS. In this comedy-adventure, two very different brothers magically travel into the world of dreams to find The Sandman so he can save their parents' marriage. Co-directed by Alex Woo and Erik Benson. **Kuku Studios/Netflix**



THE INSEPARABLES. Adapted by Bob Barlen and Cal Brunker (*PAW Patrol: The Movie*) from an original idea by Toy Story writers Joel Cohen and Alec Sokolow, this CG family movie centers on a runaway puppet and an abandoned stuffed animal who cross paths in Central Park. Directed by Jérémie Degruson (*Son of Bigfoot*). **nWave Pictures/Octopolis**



INSIDE OUT 2. Pixar's 28th feature and the sequel to the Oscar-winning 2015 movie follows the same young girl, Riley, who discovers new emotions ruling her world as she gets older. Directed by Kelsey Mann in his feature debut and penned by Meg LeFauve, and featuring the voices of Amy Poehler, Phyllis Smith, Lewis Black, Tony Hale, Liza Lapira and Maya Hawke (as Anxiety). **Disney/Pixar; June 9**



JUSTICE LEAGUE: CRISIS ON INFINITE EARTHS. An animated adaptation of the popular comic-book series by Marv Wolfman and George Pérez (1985-86) in which the Anti-Monitor is unleashed on the DC Multiverse and begins to destroy the various Earths that comprise it. Main characters include Monitor, Harbinger, Pariah, Superman Kal-El, Superboy-Prime, Alexander Luthor Jr., Flash, Psycho-Pirate and Supergirl. **DC/Warner Bros. Animation**



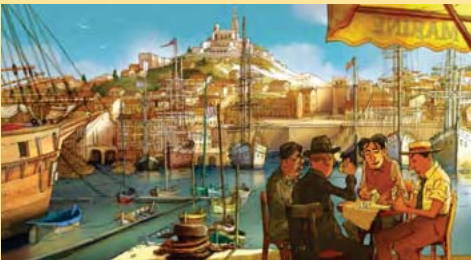
KUNG FU PANDA 4. Mike Mitchell and Stephanie Stine direct this fourth cinematic adventure of the lovable hero Po (voiced by Jack Black) which finds him facing a sinister and powerful adversary called the Chameleon while also trying to find someone to replace him as Dragon Warrior. With Angelina Jolie, Lucy Liu, Dustin Hoffman and Seth Rogen. **DreamWorks/Universal; March 29**



THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE WAR OF THE ROHIRRIM. This new animated adaptation of Tolkien's epic is set 183 years before the events of *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* and stars Brian Cox as Helm Hammerhand, the legendary king of Rohan who must battle an army of Dunlendings. Directed by Kenji Kamiyama. With Miranda Otto and Shaun Dooley. **New Line/Warner Bros./Sola; Dec. 13**



THE MAGNIFICENT LIFE OF MARCEL PAGNOL. Acclaimed director Sylvain Chomet's (*The Triplets of Belleville*) much-anticipated new movie is set in 1955 and follows the life and adventures of celebrated French writer, playwright and filmmaker Pagnol. **Onyx Films/ON Animation/Walking the Dog/Sony Pictures Classics**



MOBILE SUIT GUNDAM SEED FREEDOM. Directed by Mitsuo Fukuda, the film takes place one year after the events of *Mobile Suit Gundam SEED Destiny* in Cosmic Era 75 and centers on Kira Yamato and Lacus Clyne. **Bandai Namco Filmworks/Shochiku; Jan. 26 (Japan)**



MUFASA: THE LION KING. After becoming king of the Pride Lands, Simba tries to teach his cub about the origins of his own late father, Mufasa (Aaron Pierre), in this CG-animated photorealistic musical drama, directed by Oscar winner Barry Jenkins (*Moonlight*) and written by Jeff Nathanson. With the voices of Seth Rogen, Billy Eichner, Kelvin Harrison Jr. and John Kani. Music by Hans Zimmer, Pharrell Williams and Nicholas Britell. **Disney/Pastel Productions; Dec. 20**



NIGHT OF THE ZOOPOCALYPSE. This family comedy follows a group of animals who become zombies after their zoo is hit by a meteor. Directed by Ricardo Curtis and Rodrigo Perez-Castro. With the voices of David Harbour, Paul Sun-Hyung Lee, Scott Thompson and Gabbi Kosmidis. **Mac Guff/L'Atelier/Elevation/Apollo Films**



ORION AND THE DARK. Based on the book by Emma Yarlett, the movie centers on an anxious boy (Jacob Tremblay) who is visited by his biggest fear – the Dark (Paul Walter Hauser) – and is whisked away on a trip around the world to conquer his fears. With the voice of Werner Herzog. Sean Charmatz directs from a screenplay by Charlie Kaufman. **DreamWorks/Netflix**



SAVING BIKINI BOTTOM: THE SANDY CHEEKS MOVIE. When Bikini Bottom is suddenly scooped out of the ocean, Sandy Cheeks and SpongeBob journey to Sandy's home state of Texas, where they meet Sandy's family in this fourth SpongeBob theatrical movie. Liza Johnson directs from a script by cartoonist Kaz and Tom Stern. With the voices of Carolyn Lawrence, Tom Kenny, Bill Fagerbakke, Wanda Sykes, Loretta Devine, Johnny Knoxville, Craig Robinson and Grey DeLisle. **Nickelodeon/Netflix**



SONIC THE HEDGEHOG 3. Directed by series regular Jeff Fowler, this third installment in the movie adventures of Sega's speedy blue hero (voiced by Ben Schwartz) finds the entire Donut family traveling to Egypt where Sonic meets a pink hedgehog who claims to predict the future, while Robotnik returns from hell and awakens a new challenger, Shadow the Hedgehog. **Paramount/Blur/Marza/Sega; Dec. 10**





SPELLBOUND. Directed by Vicky Jenson, this second Skydance Animation feature follows a young princess (voiced by Rachel Zegler) in the kingdom of Lumbria who must break the spell that turned her parents (voiced by Nicole Kidman and Javier Bardem) into monsters. With the voices of John Lithgow, Jenifer Lewis, Nathan Lane. Music by Alan Menken and Glenn Slater. Produced by John Lasseter. **Skydance Animation/Netflix**



THAT CHRISTMAS. DreamWorks veteran Simon Otto (*How to Train Your Dragon*) directs this holiday feature based on the book series by Richard Curtis. It follows several entwined tales about love and loneliness, family and friends, and Santa Claus making a big mistake — as well as an enormous number of turkeys! **Locksmith Animation/DNEG/Netflix**



THELMA THE UNICORN. When a pony's dream of becoming a glamorous superstar unicorn comes true, she learns that fame and fortune come with a cost and she longs for her simple, sparkle-free life back home. Directed by Jared Hess and Lynn Wang, and based on Aaron Blabey's (*The Bad Guys*) popular book series. **Mikros Animation/Netflix**



THE TIGER'S APPRENTICE. A young Chinese American boy discovers he's part of a long lineage of magical protectors known as the Guardians, and he now must bring the estranged Zodiac animal warriors back together to fight evil forces in this adaptation of Lawrence Yep's trilogy, directed by Raman Hui, Yong Duk Jhun and Paul Watling. With the voices of Leah Lewis, Michelle Yeoh, Sandra Oh, Henry Golding, Lucy Liu and Bowen Yang. **Paramount/Mikros/Paramount+**



TRANSFORMERS ONE. Josh Cooley (*Toy Story 4*) directs this animated prequel set on Cybertron that revolves around the relationship between Optimus Prime (Chris Hemsworth) and Megatron (Brian Tyree Henry). With the voices of Scarlett Johansson (Elita), Keegan-Michael Key (Bumblebee), Jon Hamm (Sentinel Prime) and Laurence Fishburne (Alpha Trion). **ILM/Entertainment One/Hasbro/Paramount; Sept. 13**



TROUBLE. When 13-year-old Jax gets in trouble with his family, he is swept away into a parallel reality known as the World of Trouble in this movie co-created by Danny McBride and Brad Lewis. **Rough House Pictures/Spire Animation Studios**



ULTRAMAN RISING. Shannon Tindle (*Kubo and the Two Strings*) and John Aoshima (storyboard artist, *Maya and the Three*) direct this beautifully designed animated take on the popular Japanese sci-fi franchise, which was first introduced in 1966. The movie follows the adventures of an alien race of superheroes who often combat kaiju or other aliens. **Netflix/ILM/Tsuburaya Productions**



THE WILD ROBOT. Chris Sanders (*Lilo & Stitch*, *How to Train Your Dragon*) directs this adaptation of Peter Brown's illustrated book about the bond between a castaway robot named Rozzum 7134, an orphaned gosling named Brightbill, and their misfit animal friends on a deserted island. **Universal/DreamWorks ♦**





A Grand Expedition with Big Artistic Payoffs



Director Kajsa Næss comments on the colorful simplicity of the acclaimed Norwegian-Belgian animated feature, *Titina*.

I have often based my films on real characters and events, and my feature debut *Titina* is no exception. The story is inspired by two larger-than-life and a bit crazy airship flights to the North Pole in 1926 and 1928, where the small terrier Titina came along. If it was not for the documentary images to prove that these expeditions actually took place, I think it would have been hard for people to believe it. To me, the images of a gigantic airship in polar surroundings is both beautiful and absurd.

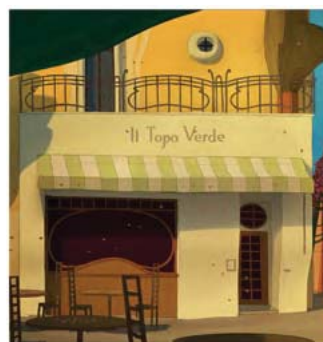


The Airship *Norge* at Svalbard, 1926.
©National Library of Norway



The natural landscape around the North Pole is vast and endless; I wanted to underline the scale. In the story, these big heroes end up quarreling over the honor that should have been big enough to share. I seek to create a contrast between these small feelings and the grandness of both nature and the endeavor itself. Style development by Emma McCann

As the story takes place in the 1920s, we wanted the visuals to pay tribute to that era. Art director Emma McCann found inspiration in the drawings of Scottish architect Charles Rennie Mackintosh (1868-1928) — his swirling linework and art nouveau style became the basis for the film's look.



Charles Rennie Mackintosh trees

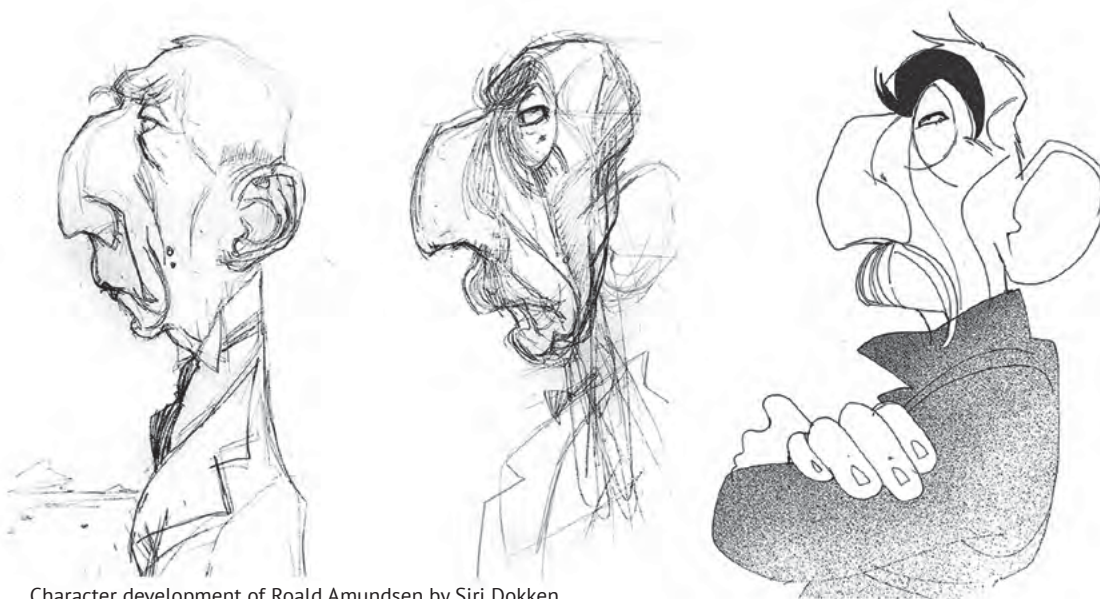




Emma has a tremendous sense of color, and we use color to distinguish between Italy (where the story begins), Norway and, finally, the North Pole. We also made a deliberate choice to avoid using a lot of shadows in the film, so the sense of depth and the lighting is simply created by color. The characters had their base colors, and then Emma adjusted the colors for every single shot to ensure integration and create the illusion of shadow.

Even if the film is inspired by true events, it was important to me that we were making an animated movie. There had to be room for imagination and playfulness. Also, I wanted to avoid showing the actual airship crash that took place, as it might be too much to bear for a family audience. The solution was to turn the crash into a trippy dreamy sequence where we experience it through the eyes of Titina. Emma did a wonderful job creating a kaleidoscopic, symphonic background rigged for a tricky camera movement.

Background design by Emma McCann



For the characters, I worked with the terrific newspaper cartoonist Siri Dokken. Siri has an irreverent approach to powerful and iconic people that I felt resonated well with the project. Her characters are also juicy and fun to animate, but we spent a long time defining a style that would be manageable to work with for the animators. ♦

***Titina* was released in several European territories in 2023. It is currently streaming on The Animation Showcase website (animationshowcase.com).**

Comic Genius!

Bryan Lee O'Malley and BenDavid Grabinski discuss their super cool Science SARU *Scott Pilgrim* remix.

- By Kambole Campbell -



Although many fans believe that the new animated take on Bryan Lee O'Malley's beloved *Scott Pilgrim* comic book series is a more faithful adaptation than the 2010 Edgar Wright film, the new series is anything but a retread.

Created, written and executive produced by O'Malley and BenDavid Grabinski (Edgar Wright also serves as an exec producer) and directed by Abel G3nora (*Star Wars: Visions*) with animation produced by Science SARU (*Inu-Oh*, *Heike Monogatari*), *Scott Pilgrim Takes Off* is probably best described as a remix — especially with the cast of the movie back on board as voice actors.

O'Malley cites SARU as his reason for returning to the series. "It was something that was too big to be even a dream of mine," he says. "The next crucial piece of the puzzle, other than Edgar and talking about it with him, was that I had dinner with BenDavid one night. I was just moaning about what I was going to do if I did a show of *Scott Pilgrim*, what would it even be?"

A Fresh Approach

He says one of the true appeals of the project was making something new. "I love all of it to pieces, but it was what it was. And I've known Bryan forever and we were on the same page, which is that the idea of doing the exact same story again just felt like a huge waste of everyone's time."

Grabinski highlights this fresh start as a chance to focus more on Ramona (Mary Elizabeth Winstead) and, in his words, "not have her just sort of be a prize to be won or something." It also proved a chance to reimagine this cast of characters, giving them an early chance to mature. "Hopefully, I'm a tiny bit older, wiser and

have more objectivity," says O'Malley on returning to his 20-year-old creations. "With the Evil Exes in particular, I mostly treated them as a joke in the original series. But now I have enough maturity to see different sides of them and find some empathy." He continues, "It was nice to finally give a bit more of Ramona's backstory with Roxie and the Twins, which I always intended for the books but ended up not using at the time. It was fun to use Robot-01."

There was a lot of trust between Science SARU and O'Malley and Grabinski, right down to their approach to character design. Under Shuhei Handa, they had license to tweak them as they saw fit, O'Malley says. "We didn't work directly with the design team — and we barely had to give notes, because we were loving everything they showed us. Our job was to work on the story and emotion and trust Science SARU to create the look of everything. I particularly love the way they handled Lucas' physique. I love the addition of Roxie's mask and kimono. And fans already noticed the cool lightning bolt motif on Scott and Ramona's hair."

O'Malley muses, "One of the keys to work-



Bryan Lee O'Malley and BenDavid Grabinski



'Hopefully, I'm a tiny bit older, wiser and have more objectivity. With the Evil Exes in particular, I mostly treated them as a joke in the original series. But now I have enough maturity to see different sides of them and find some empathy.'

— Creator Bryan Lee O'Malley



REMIXED AND REVITALIZED: Produced and written by Bryan Lee O'Malley and co-creator BenDavid Grabinski, *Scott Pilgrim Takes Off* was widely praised for taking the beloved comic series in new directions and for the high-energy visuals developed by Science SARU.

ing with artists successfully is to let them draw the things that they're obsessed with and just see where they take things, because you have to be excited in order to draw exciting animation." In that sense, it was valuable not to be too precious about the exact nature of how the story unfolded.

In the spirit of the comics, *Takes Off* is full of loving nods to the pop culture that inspired it. Anime fans will note references to *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, but also similarities with its "Rebuild" tetralogy of films. After O'Malley describes the series as "peak high school" for him, both O'Malley and Grabinski note the similarities with the *Rebuild* films, pointing out that both are instances of a creator returning to a work and "shaking things up, knowing that the other version still exists." O'Malley notes, "The Rebuilds just ended up being a really easy way for us to explain what we were doing. So, now when I tell people what I'm doing, I could say it's a *Scott Pilgrim* 'rebuild.' But was that our intention when we did our outlines? No. But it is a very similar thing."

Grabinski and O'Malley's affinity for such pop cultural ephemera extends far beyond *Evangelion*. One such moment arrives via a musical sequence, where a character played by Will Forte belts out "Konya wa Hurricane" from the OVA series *Bubblegum Crisis*. "Streets of Fire is one of my favorite movies of all time, so I got Bryan hooked on *Streets of Fire* one day," recalls Grabinski. "We were texting about it, and he said, 'Oh, you know the pilot of *Bubblegum Crisis* has a song that seems like it's an homage to that movie.' It feels like they used 'Nowhere Fast' as a temp track and then put a new song in there and then it's clearly an homage to *Ellen Aim*. And we had a scene where



[Forte's character] and the twins sing a song, but we were going to write an original one. And so, I just text him, what if he sings a cover of this? And suddenly, Will Forte is working with a dialect coach and learning Japanese!"

Grabinski recalls his past work with composer Joseph Trapanese: "He's done all my stuff. He's a close friend of mine, he understands my taste and I have a good shorthand with him. I love Anamanaguchi, seen them live a bunch. I loved the soundtrack to the video game. And I think at one point, I just mentioned — sort of an organic conversation talking about how he [Trapanese] did a score with Daft Punk [for *Tron: Legacy*] and with Mike Shinoda for *The Raid*. So, I thought, 'What if they collaborated on this?'"

Harmonious Collaborators

Aside from practical reasons, due to the scope of the show's music between its score and original songs, the collaboration was simply exciting to consider. There was a clear division in oversight between the show creators on the soundtrack. "Bryan put most of his brain into the songs and then I put most of my brain into the

score. And score is one of my favorite things in the world to do. I sometimes say I just make things to put music in it."

In the same sense, the music in *Scott Pilgrim Takes Off* also operates as a way to see new angles on familiar characters. One such angle can be seen with Knives Chau, a supporting character who gets to express herself better than in the film. Grabinski says: "I think my favorite music thing in the whole season is Kim and Knives in Episode 3, their jam session. And I had nothing to do with that, except I do think at one point Bryan said, 'I want it to go cosmic.' And I agreed!"

O'Malley acknowledges that the diegetic music sequences comprised the more difficult sequences in *Takes Off*. "You want it [to] feel like it grows out of nothing into something. It's just what I envisioned when I was writing the script originally. And then on other songs, I got to work on demos and stuff. I got to kind of flex my musical creative muscles a little bit, which was nice. And I'm just really happy with how it all came together." ♦

The first eight-episode season of *Scott Pilgrim Takes Off* is currently streaming on Netflix.



Have Yourself a Criminal Christmas

The DreamWorks Bad Guys wreak some sublime seasonal havoc in their new holiday special.

- By Tom McLean -



Bret Haaland

If there's one thing criminals and kids alike respect about Christmas, it's Santa Claus. The kid part is obvious. The criminal part — at least according to DreamWorks Animation Television's new holiday special, *The Bad Guys: A Very Bad Holiday* — comes down to sheer envy over Santa's unbeatable record of breaking into more houses than anyone in history without being caught.

The half-hour special, which is currently streaming on Netflix, is a prequel to the 2022 DreamWorks Animation feature film *The Bad Guys*, based on the book series by Aaron Blabey. The notorious anthropomorphic criminals — Mr. Wolf, Mr. Snake, Ms. Tarantula, Mr. Piranha and Mr. Shark — are looking forward to Christmas morning because the closed banks and shops make easy pickings.

Saving Christmas Again

But things go awry when the gang accidentally destroys the city's beloved Santa Claus balloon, effectively canceling the holiday — and their easy crime spree. So, the group must bring Christmas back — and maybe end up saving the city from a bigger threat somewhere along the way.

The voice cast, which is different from the movie's, includes Michael Godere as Mr. Wolf, Chris Diamantopoulos as Mr. Snake, Ezekiel Ajeigbe as Mr. Shark, Mallory Low as Ms. Tarantula, Raul Ceballos as Mr. Piranha and Kari Wahlgren as DJ Trudy Tude.

Writer and executive producer Katherine Nolfi, whose credits include *Abominable* and *the Invisible City* and *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, says she was a fan of the feature and is drawn to stories about misfits who find fam-

ily with each other. "The thought of taking that kind of subversive, lighthearted sense of humor that the Bad Guys have and combining it with a holiday special was pretty irresistible," she says. "That was just such a blast to play with those characters in that that setting."

"These guys are lovable. They're not out to really hurt anybody, but they do kind of bend rules," says director Bret Haaland, a DreamWorks Animation TV veteran and executive producer on the special. The production schedule was quick for the 25-minute special, which played toward Haaland's strengths and experience mixing action and comedy on DreamWorks series such as *Fast & Furious Spy Racers* and *All Hail King Julien*.

"They knew that this special was going to need to be done quickly, with a very efficient, almost TV approach to it, so that it would be



'Having five leads with such big personalities and wanting to give them all their due in the story took some figuring out, but I think we really were able to highlight these great characters.'

— Producer Katherine Nolfi



CHANGE OF HEART: Directed by Bret Haaland and produced by Katherine Nolfi, the holiday special finds The Bad Guys feeling guilty about destroying a giant Santa Claus parade balloon.



quick and fun and lively and popping," he says. "They just thought I was a good candidate for it, and I was very happy to be selected. So, I agreed right away."

A fan of the film and the book series it's based on, Nolfi says the biggest challenge was finding ways to let each character shine. "Having five leads with such big personalities and wanting to give them all their due in the story took some figuring out, but I think with Brett's help — with the whole team's help — we really were able to highlight these great characters."

Haaland says he's used to working quickly on projects like this. Storyboarding took about six weeks, with the animatic taking another six weeks. Then, there were nine weeks of animation and three to six weeks of postproduction. "Each one of those stages is a sprint," he says.

Animation work was done overseas by 88 Pictures, which has one facility in Toronto and three in India. "[I] was literally typing up essays worth of notes down to the frame to get exactly what we wanted," Haaland says. "I ended up storyboarding about 80% of the episode myself, which is fine, because I like to do that. ... And then we have a great in-house comp supervisor and effects artists, and they just went to town on it for the big action stuff at the end."

Another challenge was making sure the special fit well with the acclaimed original feature. Haaland says the folks who made the 2022 movie weighed in and offered a few notes that helped.

"For example, there's a bit where — spoiler

alert — Wolf is inside of a mechanical suit, and he realizes his friends are in trouble," Haaland says. "At one point, we had this speech between him and Snake, where they had this long talk, and the director of the feature, he's like, 'I don't think they would take the time to do that. Once he knows that his friends are in trouble, he's going to save them right then.'"

The short production schedule also required the voice roles to be recast. Nolfi says the casting team at DreamWorks was able to find actors who sound like the feature cast while also bringing something new to the characters. "To me, it feels like this great through line from the feature," she says.

One of the creative challenges for Haaland was to find balance in the plot between the playful setup and the more dramatic latter half when The Bad Guys are forced against their best intentions to play hero. "They still have to be The Bad Guys," he says. "The script was great in doing that, but then you also look for little personality things while they're in the moment."

Of course, making an animated holiday special carries its own pressures. A successful one can become perennial and be revisited year after year. And it's not always easy to get in the Christmas spirit if you're working on the project over the summer.

"You have a lot of boxes to check, so to speak," Haaland says. "I think we're successful in doing that. And I think the reward comes in making it feel kind of alive and special — even

including a Christmas song — just trying to put in all those things that make it A) feel like The Bad Guys and B) making it also about Christmas."

The Good Team

Nolfi credits the collaboration with improving the final result. "I will say you spend so much time trying to come up with the perfect line, and then a visual Bret can add communicates it so much better, or a toss off effort that the actor improvised," she says. "And you're like, 'Oh, there it is!' It's the visual moment, that always nails the joke."

Nolfi gives additional credit to art director Jonathan Pyun for bringing some impressive visuals to the story, while Haaland credits the sound team — mixing, effects and music — for their work on the special.

The entire experience turned out to be an enjoyable and smooth one for Haaland. "It's not often that I get a script that's so well written," he says. "I also have to say, the guidance from the feature team was just a true pleasure. Those guys are really cool, they're really fun and they're very open and very enthusiastic. And it was just wonderful to be able to reach out whenever you wanted to — but I never felt like they were stepping on me, either. There was a lot of freedom. So that was a real pleasure." ♦

The Bad Guys: A Very Bad Holiday premieres on November 30 on Netflix.

Gotta Host Them All!

Pokémon Concierge gives us a softer, stop-motion take on the popular characters introduced 27 years ago.

- By Karen Idelson -



Fans of Pokémon will soon have a chance to discover the softer, more tactile side of these frisky creatures when *Pokémon Concierge* comes to Netflix this winter.

The charming miniseries tells the story of Haru, a young woman working at a resort that serves many Pokémon guests. She has just started her job and there's a lot she must learn about dealing with Pokémon. She works with her partner, Psyduck, and the two of them discover how to do this job together. On top of figuring out what the Pokémon want, Haru also has to manage co-worker relationships with Alisa and Tyler.

There will also be appearances by beloved characters such as Pikachu, Eevee, Dragonite and Magikarp. The series also promises additional surprise characters and staff members who will appear at the resort as well.

The show is directed by Iku Ogawa, who is also known for the animated thriller *Hidari*, which came out this year. Harumi Doki wrote the episodes and previously worked on *Anniversa-*

ry and *Re/Member*. Concept art and character design was done by Tadahiro Uesugi, who also has worked on *Coraline* as a concept artist, *Big Hero 6* as a visual development artist and *Luca* as a development artist.

Short and Sweet

Based on the popular characters created by game designer and director Satoshi Tajiri in 1996, the series breaks with what's expected because it's done entirely in stop-motion animation. The first season is made up of four episodes that are about 14 to 20 minutes long and all of which were created at Dwarf Studios in Japan. Considered one of Japan's leading stop-motion studios, the company recently celebrated its 20th anniversary.

"Focusing on stop-motion animation shoot, the production took 4 ½ months, with each animator responsible for four to five seconds of production per day," says Ogawa. "We took 86,000 shots for a total of four episodes of approximately 60-plus minutes."

The series marks the first collaboration between Netflix and The Pokémon Company, but the streamer has worked with Dwarf Studios in the past. The stop-motion-focused studio also produced *Rilakkuma and Kaoru* and *Rilakkuma's Theme Park Adventure*, which are both available on Netflix globally. *Rilakkuma's Theme Park Adventure* has been nominated for an International Emmy Award in the Kids Animation category. *Rilakkuma and Kaoru* was nominated for Outstanding Achievement for Directing in an Animated Television/Broadcast Production at the 2020 Annie Awards.

Dwarf Studios has a strong reputation for its stop-motion work and was also behind the 2016 stop-motion animated series *The Curious Kitty & Friends*, which was aimed at a preschool audience and appeared on Prime Video. This was the first collaboration with a Japanese studio for the streamer. The show was the brainchild of revered animator and Dwarf Studios founding member Tsuneo Goda, who also created the Japanese sensation Domo, the official mascot of the Japanese public broadcasting company NHK.



'I approached this world thinking what it would be like if Pokémon were part of human culture, hoping the show could be seen by a global audience.'

— Director Iku Ogawa



COLLECTIBLE GUESTS: Haru, the kind concierge at the Pokémon resort, welcomes a wide variety of guests in the charming new Netflix stop-motion miniseries.

"Netflix is looking forward to delighting fans in Japan and around the world with *Pokémon Concierge*, an entirely new visual and storytelling experience featuring groundbreaking stop-motion animation set in the Pokémon world in close collaboration with The Pokémon Company," says Minyoung Kim, vice president of Netflix Content in Asia.

The show features both a Japanese voice cast and an English dub cast. Japanese voice actors include Non, also known as Rena Nōnen (*In This Corner of the World*) as Haru; Fairouz Ai (*Jolo's Bizarre Adventure: Stone Ocean*) as Alisa; Eita Okuno (*Yell*) as Tyler; and Yoshiko Takemura (*Tiger & Bunny*) as Watanabe.

In the English-dubbed version, Haru is played by Karen Fukuhara (*The Boy and the Heron*); Alisa is voiced by Imani Hakim (*Everybody Hates Chris*); Tyler is played by Josh Keaton (*Voltron: Legendary Defender*); and Watanabe is portrayed by Lori Alan (*SpongeBob SquarePants*).

When Ogawa began working with the voice actors, he decided to film Non while she performed her role of Haru. As she made each facial expression, the animators carefully studied her face and then worked to incorporate her mannerisms into Haru. The studio uses the technique of 3D printing dozens upon dozens of facial expressions of its characters to give them the maximum flexibility to create character performances. So, in Haru's design DNA there is a bit

of Non, who is well known in Japan for her work on the drama series *Amachan* and as a singer.

"I approached this world thinking what it would be like if Pokémon were part of human culture, hoping the show could be seen by a global audience," says Ogawa. And the trailer certainly shows the human and Pokémon worlds colliding as Haru tries to balance learning her duties, pleasing the Pokémon guests and getting along with her co-workers.

Non adds, "I had so much fun (playing Haru). She works so hard, but sometimes things just don't work out. It's endearing to me. I'm a bit reckless as well, so it was great to feel a connection to the character. It's really exciting to me because this was the first time my body language was also recorded during voice acting. Even if many things go wrong and (Haru) feels upset, Pokémon will always be there for her. I felt it would be wonderful to have Pokémon with me. I was thinking of that when I acted. That made Pokémon Resort even more of a place where I want to be."

Pokémon Concierge will also have some of its music performed by Japanese pop culture royalty. The show's theme song, *Have a Good Time*, will be sung by the iconic Mariya Takeuchi, who is one of the bestselling Japanese pop singers of all time. In addition to selling more than 16 million records, she's also composed and produced

songs for many other artists. The singer is particularly known for a genre called "City Pop," which came to incorporate a wide range of styles such as disco, funk and R&B.

Sunny Colors and Outlook

The series is bathed in a sun-washed color palette, and the Pokémon in the series look more playful than in previous incarnations now that they're stop-motion characters, each with a fuzzy-looking coat. There's a meticulous attention to detail that the director intended to draw the audience into the stories. And Haru inhabits both a human world and the world of the imaginative little monsters as she tries to accommodate guests who can't really tell her what they want. All her comedic struggles start there while she tries to navigate her work.

"I hope that everyone will think that it would be happy to have Pokémon in their daily lives after watching this series," says Ogawa. "I believe that there are always new discoveries upon each viewing, whether it's the sets, character movements or the movements of Pokémon, including the subtleties of what's happening in the background. I hope everyone enjoys watching it again and again." ♦

***Pokémon Concierge* premieres on Netflix on December 28.**

A Child's Toy Comes to Life

Award-winning producer Martin Pope discusses his new hybrid adaptation of *The Velveteen Rabbit* for Apple TV+.

- By Ramin Zahed -

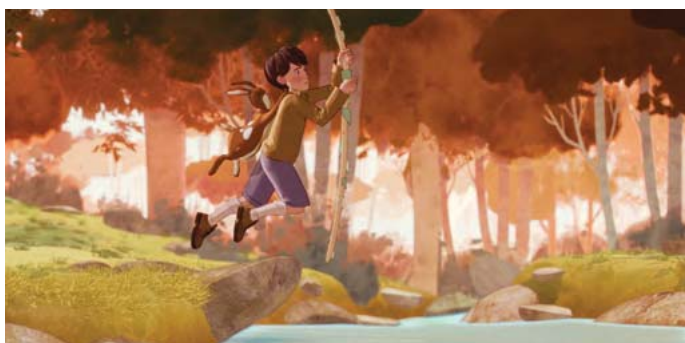


The final weeks of the year are the perfect time for the family to catch well-made adaptations of heartwarming literary properties. This year, you can add Apple TV+'s charming mixed-media take on Margery Williams' beloved 1922 children's book, *The Velveteen Rabbit*, to the mix. The story about a stuffed rabbit's heart-felt wish to become a real animal through the love of its owner has been adapted into a small-screen special.

Produced by Apple TV+ and Magic Light Pictures, the 40-minute special feature is produced by Emmy winner Martin Pope from a screenplay by Tom Bidwell. The cast includes Alex Lawther as the Velveteen Rabbit, Helena Bonham Carter as Wise Horse and Nicola Coughlan as Playroom Fairy.

Quality Classics

Pope, who has produced numerous animated children's specials throughout the years in-



cluding *The Gruffalo*, *Room on the Broom*, *Zog*, *The Snail and the Whale* and *The Smoos and the Smoos*, says he and his team at U.K.-based Magic Light Pictures are always looking for great stories that will resonate with children and families worldwide. However, it was actress Helena Bonham Carter who suggested the book to Pope.

"We love it when we find one, but then we have to find the right way to develop it, as there is always a responsibility when working with great stories to do them justice," he notes. "Years ago, when we were doing a voice recording for *The Gruffalo*, the brilliant Helena Bonham Car-

ter, who is an old friend from a previous film, gave us a copy of *The Velveteen Rabbit* and said I should try to find a way to do this."

At the time Pope couldn't take on the project, but years later when Bianca Rodway joined the company as development producer, she also suggested the book. "We felt now was finally the time to jump on such a wonderful opportunity," he says. "We began to look for a great

writer and got talking with the brilliant Tom Bidwell (Oscar-nominated short *Wish 143*, TV series *My Mad Fat Diary*) and together we all started thinking about how best to tell the story."

Because Magic Light specializes both in animation and live-action, Pope and his team decided to opt for whatever medium worked best to tell the story of the young boy and his stuffed rabbit. "The key is how best to connect our audience with the story — everything has to be at the service of that," says the producer. "So, the more we looked into the story of *The Velveteen Rabbit* and explored how we could make it really emotionally resonant, the more we felt that it had to be told in



'The Velveteen Rabbit is cherished by so many people because of what it says to them about the selfless nature of love, and that's an important message at any time.'

— Producer Martin Pope



OUT OF THE TOY BOX: Magic Light's new adaptation of *The Velveteen Rabbit* offers a captivating mix of live action, 2D animation and stop-motion puppets.

different media.”

The creative team knew they wanted to tell the story not only from the point of view of the boy who is given the Rabbit at Christmas, but also from the POV of the Rabbit. “That’s why we were already talking about mixing live action and stop motion. And then at the end of the story, the Rabbit has to become real, so we were talking about having CG-animated rabbits. Then, Tom Bidwell added these scenes of shared adventures, where the boy and the rabbit are exploring imaginatively together; those scenes needed to be in a different style such as 2D. So, the mixed-media approach absolutely grew out of how best to tell the story.”

“From greenlight to delivery has been just over a year, first of all with three weeks of live-action shooting with the wonderful young actor Phoenix Laroche and director Jenny Perrott,” recalls Pope. “Then, we were working with Rick Thiele and the brilliant team at Red Knuckles in London on the animation with each of the different techniques brought about in CG. We had a team of about 300 people working in both live-action and animation departments.”

In prepping the film, Pope says a lot of time was spent coordinating the interplay of live action and animation. “We had to figure out how the Rabbit would work in all the media — and we had the fantastic prop Rabbits built

at Andy Gent’s AMS studio in London,” he notes. “So, animation preproduction started in the summer of 2022, which really doesn’t feel that long ago. All in all, there was a lot of animation to do in a tight time scale, but I think Red Knuckles did a wonderful job in bringing those elements of the story to life.”

Claudia Brugnaletti had already designed all the toy characters (in particular, the rabbit) before filming, so that the boy could play with a prop the team would then bring to life in stop motion. “We’d also designed all of the other toys and AMS made Prop versions which we used during the live-action — the stand-ins — mainly for reference in filming live-action scenes and helping prepare the plate shots,” Pope points out. “Of course, the stand-ins were removed as much as possible before filming or else painted out afterwards and replaced with the real toys. So, it’s been a really enjoyable and complicated project to put together, and we hope all that planning will make it feel to the viewer as though it’s seamless!”

Pope believes the story of *The Velveteen Rabbit* is quite beautiful and really emotional and that the special’s script has captured those qualities in a magical way. “I loved being back on a live-action set having spent the last dozen years in animation,” he says. “I also love the animation, which I think adds a wonderfully different dimension to the live action. I real-

ly hope kids in the audience will see a boy who’s just been given a new toy and then they’ll see that toy come to life, and those kids will maybe wonder about their own toys.”

Gift of Imagination

When asked about the film’s visual influences, Pope mentions Ingmar Bergman’s seminal masterpiece *Fanny and Alexander*. “It remains one of the greatest about childhood and imagination,” he says. “We referenced it a lot at Magic Light Pictures. As more teams were engaged, of course the range of references and visual influences expanded. But for me, *Fanny and Alexander* is an important influence.”

At a time when the world seems like a difficult and challenging place for kids and families, Pope says he believes it’s important to make films where the audience can feel revitalized. “That’s why it’s been fantastic to work on a story which is about the power of imagination and how love can evolve and be liberating. The boy and the Rabbit give each other so much, and the Rabbit’s selfless love is transformative both for him and the child. *The Velveteen Rabbit* is cherished by so many people because of what it says to them about the selfless nature of love, and that’s an important message at any time.” ♦

***The Velveteen Rabbit* is streaming on Apple TV+.**

A Beloved Kitty's Cat-astrophic Holiday

The creative duo behind Channel 4's new special *Mog's Christmas* discuss the making of their lovely animated special.

- By Ramin Zahed -



The holiday season wouldn't be quite the same without a beautifully crafted, 2D animated special from our friends across the Pond.

This year, the talented team at Lupus Films, which are best known for quality projects such as *The Snowman and the Snowdog*, *Ethel & Ernest* and *The Tiger Who Came to Tea*, have prepared another charming present for Channel 4 audiences. The new special, *Mog's Christmas*, is based on a series of popular books by Judith Kerr (which started with *Mog the Forgetful Cat* in 1970 and ended with *Mog's Birthday* in 2020).

In the new special, which is directed by Robin Shaw, written by Joanna Harrison and produced

by Lupus co-founder Ruth Fielding, the beloved family cat feels a bit ignored and scrambles onto the roof when house guests and giant Christmas tree arrive. The stellar voice cast includes Adjoa Andoh, Benedict Cumberbatch, Miriam Margolyes and Claire Foy.

Fielding, whose many animation credits include *The Snowman and the Snowdog*, *Ethel & Ernest* and *We're Going on a Bear Hunt*, says she and her team were looking for another Judith Kerr tale to adapt for animation after they delivered *The Tiger Who Came to Tea* in 2019. "The *Mog* books seemed to be the obvious choice for a family audience," she says. "Channel 4 felt the same way and commissioned us to adapt the book *Mog's Christmas* into an an-

imated film. The special was animated and produced in our studio in London with some people working remotely but the majority in the studio. It took us 18 months from script sign off to delivery."

Lovingly Crafted in 2D

According to director Robin Shaw, who also worked on *The Tiger Who Came to Tea* and *We're Going on a Bear Hunt*, the project employed 63 animators and artists. "They all used TVPaint, which is by far the most versatile software for this kind of traditional, hand-drawn 2D animation, he notes. "It enables you to draw everything from the boards to backgrounds in full color and see the finished



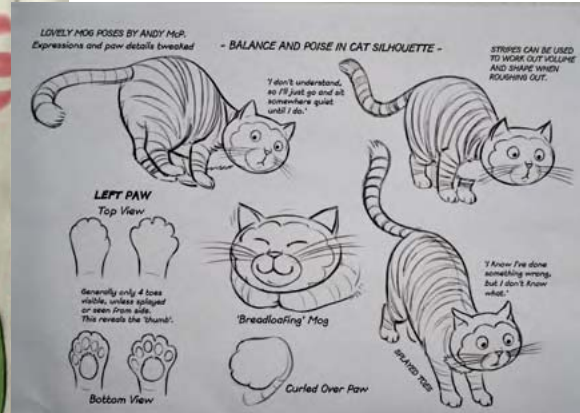
'One of the themes in the film is a sense of belonging, and I'd love it if people watched the film and felt as though, in that moment, they all belonged with each other.'

— Director Robin Shaw



'I was inspired by the success of hand-drawn family animated specials like *The Snowman* and wanted to produce films like that.'

— Producer Ruth Fielding



FELINE TROUBLE: A beloved family pet named Mog goes missing on the big holiday in the new animated special *Mog's Christmas*, based on Judith Kerr's popular books.

frame as it will end up on screen. As a result we can concentrate on the animation and the drawing, rather than the compositing, something which I think is key for keeping that stylistic link with Judith Kerr's books."

Shaw says he loves the way the main character Mog's inner voice and thoughts are foremost in the book and the whole series. "All the stories are told very much from her point of view," he says. "I really ran with that idea and tried to visualize the weirdness of humans and their Christmassy goings-on as seen through her eyes. It allowed me to do everything – from having a marching Christmas Tree to making some of the characters more extreme and funny than they might have been were we watching the story play out through human eyes."

The special's animation style closely follows the book's original illustration style. "There's an awful lot of skilled frame-by-frame brushwork that goes into the animation," notes Shaw. "If you try to leave a detail out here or there, the artwork very quickly stops looking and feeling like Judith Kerr's drawings. That's why a lot of time was spent working out how we could replicate her characteristic brush-and-ink work."

He adds, "For the interiors – just as I did with *The Tiger Who Came to Tea* – I've used the white of the page in the same way that Judith Kerr did; for simple, clear and fun storytelling

in a domestic setting. Most of the film is set outside, however, and I've really tried to conjure up the spirit of London getting ready for Christmas and the beauty of snow falling on city streets at night."

One of the main challenges for Shaw and his team was maintaining a balance between the story being all about Mog whilst allowing room for all of the humans around her to have their own characteristics and moment in the spotlight. "We need feel like we know them all and belong with them as much as she does," Shaw points out. "On a practical level, I'd say the most difficult thing was – as it always is – staying true to such a specific style of illustration. With this kind of work every little detail counts, from Judith Kerr's use of perspective and composition to the way she mixed media in a single drawing; it all needs respecting and following at every stage in the production."

Not surprisingly, both Fielding and Shaw mention Channel 4's beloved 1982 adaptation of Raymond Briggs' *The Snowman* when asked about some of their favorite animated works of all time.

"Growing up, *Camberwick Green* and *Trump-ton* were two British favorite series of mine, but I also loved the comedy of *Hong Kong Phooey* and *Scooby-Doo*," says Fielding. "It was only when I was working at Channel 4 in my late twenties that I discovered the artistic mastery of Raymond Briggs' classics like *The*

Bear and *The Snowman*. I was inspired by the success of these hand-drawn family animated specials and wanted to produce films like that."

In the Footsteps of *The Snowman*

Shaw says he grew up on a diet of beautifully crafted, handmade animated series like *Ivor The Engine*, the original 70s version of *Paddington Bear* and *The Snowman*. "The way I could see and enjoy how they were made inspired me to go off and draw and make my own things," says the director. "That has never left me. As an adult I discovered the work of people like Yuri Norstein, which captured me in exactly the same way."

The director and producer of *Mog's Christmas* both hope their show will add to the viewers' holiday cheer this month. "I hope audiences will come away feeling like they've all really enjoyed something together," says Shaw. "One of the themes in the film is a sense of belonging, and I'd love it if people watched the film and felt as though, in that moment, they all belonged with each other."

Adds Fielding, "We hope that audiences will feel like they've had a big warm Christmassy hug after they've watched the film." ♦

***Mog's Christmas* is slated to premiere on Channel 4 in the U.K. on Christmas Day. No U.S. airdate has been announced.**

A Cat for All Seasons

Producer Barney Goodland introduces us to Magic Light's purrrfect new special, *Tabby McTat*.

BC audiences are treated to a new animated adaptation of a children's book by Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler this Christmas. Produced by Magic Light Pictures, *Tabby McTat* follows a street performer named Fred and his musical cat Tabby who enjoy entertaining audiences in London until tragedy strikes. The charming special is produced by **Barney Goodland** and Michael Rose. Goodland was kind enough to answer a few of our questions about this new venture:

The Origins: This is Magic Light Pictures 11th adaptation of a Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler picture book. *The Gruffalo* was the first animated film I worked on as an assistant and I've been with Magic Light ever since. *Tabby McTat* has always been a favorite with us and with fans, so when our script writers, Max Lang and Suzanne Lang, came up with a way of approaching the adaptation it was a very easy decision to keep going and make this our next special.

Production Details: From the first treatment to delivery, the film took close to two years to produce. We spend a couple of months on the script and, then, six to nine months on the animatic. Lots of the stages then overlap, but design, modeling, animation, lighting, and comp all take about six to eight months each. We do cast recordings before animation starts and music composition begins in the second half of the animation's schedule. Recording the music, completing the sound mix and grade then takes three to four weeks at the end.

The special was animated by Red Star (*The Amazing Maurice*) in Sheffield. This is our first collaboration with them, but they have a highly skilled and experienced team who picked this project up magnificently. We used Maya Autodesk, Houdini, Substance, Photoshop, Fusion and zBrush. Across all departments approxi-

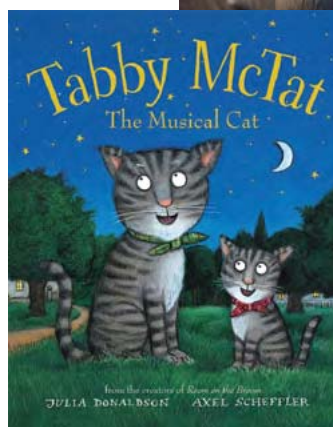
mately 120 people have worked on the film.

Project Highlights: I love that it's a story about friendship and family and the strength of relationships. It's also about change and learning how to accept it. The story shows us how relationships can change and evolve and how they can become stronger for it.

Animation Style:

The film is fully CGI, but the style is in a stop motion and clay aesthetic. This follows all of our previous Donaldson and Scheffler specials and harks back to *The Gruffalo*, *The Gruffalo's Child* and *Room on the Broom*. Those specials were made using a combination of model sets and CGI characters. It's an aesthetic that gives the film a fantastic texture and, we think, the feeling that the books have come to life.

Biggest Challenges: Animating cats (with four legs, a tail, whiskers, and expressive ears) is always challenging. The animators also had to contend with cats interacting with humans and them both being key characters for the story. I'm sure there are areas of the U.K. where cat video analytics have spikes from all our animators analyzing cat videos on a loop for reference. Bringing London to life was also a challenge. It not only had to feel believable as London, but also feel true to Axel Scheffler's drawings and a natural part of the Magic Light aesthetic. I think the directors, Sarah Scrimgeour and Jac Hamman, and the artistic and design teams have all done an incredible job. To me, the London in *Tabby McTat* feels realistic and rich in detail, whilst maintaining a



Barney Goodland

connection to Axel's work.

Early Inspirations: From my childhood, I fondly remember watching Disney's *Robin Hood* (1973) and *The BFG* (1983, Cosgrove Hall). At home we had these recorded to videotape from Christmas TV and I remember watching them again and again all year round. The thing that really engaged me was the energy and vibrancy of the films and how I could get swept up in the story. They didn't have a conscious influence on me looking to work on Christmas specials, but maybe that's one of the reasons why I love producing Magic Light's films so much – that focus on shared viewing and Christmas joy.

Project Goals: I hope audiences will feel good about themselves and the people in their lives. That they feel touched by a beautiful and engaging story and that some holiday warmth has emanated from their screens. And, if they don't already have a cat, I hope they'll be thinking about adopting one. ♦

Tabby McTat premieres on the BBC this Christmas.

from the creators of Kapemahu
FYC | Best Animated Short

AIKĀNE

Directed and animated by Daniel Sousa, Dean Hamer, Joe Wilson
Producer Hinalimoana Wong-Kalu Exec Producer Judith Light

"A universal love story"
them

"Tender and strong"
ZIPPY FRAMES



A Master Craftsman's New Adventure

Acclaimed Disney animator Andreas Deja discusses his acclaimed, Oscar-qualified short *Mushka*.

Can you tell us a bit about the history and genesis of the short?

Andreas Deja: After spending 30 great years at Disney, I just found myself in a position where I could create my own project, in my own studio. I started by asking myself what would be the most fun to draw and animate? Because of my love of animals, I decided a tiger would be really fascinating. I realized if I pair the tiger with a little girl, there would be a nice contrast in terms of that relationship, and it could be fascinating building a story around that. Luckily, I have a good friend who's a writer who helped me with a screenplay. He fleshed out this basic idea that I had about this girl and the tiger growing up and bonding. I committed to the screenplay because it felt like a great novel.

How did you go about deciding on the visual style of *Mushka*?

The first Disney films I saw when I was younger were the great Disney animated films of the sixties and seventies. Films like *101 Dalmatians*, *The Jungle Book* and others that were drawn in a great sketchy way. The characters had black outlines. There is a beautiful looseness to that kind of animation that I've always loved. So, this now being my first solo project, I thought... I really want to do that style too! I wanted something that almost looks unfinished, and therefore has some nice artistic human touches.



What were your biggest challenges as you set out to fund and launch your short?

At Disney I was always involved in animating one character. I loved that of course, but when I set out to work on my own film and working from scratch, I had to create a story, find a team, work with a background artist and actors, be involved in the voice recordings and everything, all the way to the final sound mix at the end. There are so many pieces to creating an



Andreas Deja

animated film and on *Mushka* I experienced every aspect. It was really fun to wear all these different hats on top of animating!

What has been the most rewarding aspect of seeing your project come to life?

You make a film not for yourself, but for the audience. Having now had several screenings, I've realized the biggest joy out of the whole process is to sit with an audience. It never gets old. I can't help getting excited when I see that moment the story is coming across, and how people react. When they smile or they giggle at the right moments, and they might even shed a tear at the end. That's the biggest reward of all.

You've worked on some of the most beloved animated features in Disney's recent history (Gaston in *Beauty and the Beast*, Jafar in *Aladdin*, Scar in *The Lion King*, Lilo in *Lilo & Stitch*) How was working on your short different from your previous experiences?

At Disney I was responsible for just for the acting and the emotions of one character. With *Mushka*, I had to open up my horizon, so to speak, and become a filmmaker, not just an an-

imator. I had to motivate people to help me with my storytelling, storyboarding, the animation and all the other parts. With this film, I really feel like I've grown, and it is such a sense of accomplishment. It took a while to make, honestly longer than that I thought, but I'm really, really proud of the film and what our small *Mushka* crew achieved. And I myself, truly feel like a filmmaker now.

What kind of advice can you give young animators who dream about creating their own short?

One of the biggest things I hope for that people might take away from watching *Mushka* is that you can create your own film and it's not expensive. There are so many programs that will help you to get your story to the screen. It doesn't have to be half an hour. Even if you just have an idea for a two or three minute short, now is a great time to do it. Expressing yourself through animation is a wonderful thing. I'm hopeful people realize they can do something like it too!



Where do you see feature animation going in the next 10 years?

I think audiences will always look for great stories and interesting storytelling. Good stories with interesting, fascinating characters that people get invested in and want to follow will always be key. How the techniques will change with all these new technologies being talked about and discussed I really don't know, but I think that the creativity of shaping a story and creating great characters will be the most important thing. People who create great animated stories will always succeed, no matter what the tools. ♦



For more info, visit mushkathemovie.com

"Beautifully Drawn"

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-Film Threat



ANDREAS DEJA'S

MUSHKA

FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION
Best Animated Short



Birds, Snakes and Totalitarian Architecture

VFX supervisor Adrian de Wet details the impressive visuals created for the new *Hunger Games* prequel.

- By Trevor Hogg -



In the new prequel *The Hunger Games: The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*, audiences meet a young version of tyrannical President of Panem, Coriolanus Snow (Tom Blyth). He is a star student at The Academy, determined to be a positive force of change, but a series of traumatic events lead him down a path of oppression and subjugation. This character transformation is at the heart of filmmaker Francis Lawrence's return to the dystopian franchise, for which he has directed three out of four installments. Frequent collaborator Adrian de Wet is also back as visual effects supervisor.

Over a period of a year, De Wet partnered with VFX producer Eve Fizzinoglia to create 1,400 shots by Important Looking Pirates, Ghost VFX, Outpost VFX and RISE. Among the many inspirations for the visuals was the reconstruction of European cities post World War II.

Capitol Building

"One of things I learned was that city planners and architects took the opportunity to redesign the layout of cities," notes De Wet. "Prior to that moment, cities grew organically without

looking at the big picture. But after Berlin was flattened, they took the opportunity to open up the city and design it as a whole. We tried to get some of that into The Capitol. It's designed more symmetrically and ceremonially because it's a more authoritarian regime that is ruling Panem."

Harkening back to the Roman Colosseum's gladiator fights, the 10th Annual Hunger Games unfolds in an arena where the occupied districts' Tributes fight one another to the death for the entertainment of the masses. The interior of the arena was shot in Wrocław's Centennial Hall in Poland, which was combined with Berlin Olympic Stadium to create the exterior.

"Centennial Hall was built in 1913 and is an architectural wonder," says De Wet. "It's an enormous dome with seats all around the inside and beautiful Art Deco arches. We weren't allowed to do so much mark it. It had to be left completely pristine. We shot in there but replaced all of it in CG. We even had to age the undestroyed areas, but for the post-bombing arena we had to have a huge hole in the ceiling that took up a third of the screen real estate.

His team also had to put scorch marks and

explosion damage all over the walls. He adds, "Thousands and thousands of these orange seats all around the side had to be broken apart, damaged and destroyed for fairly close-up shots. On the day we had a little bit of rubble; however, in order to get the cameras rolling through there and stunt performers and actors running around the arena floor, we had to carve alleyways and pathways that couldn't stay in the final image. We ended up replacing a lot of the rubble on the floor."

In the film, Head Gamemaker Dr. Gaul (portrayed by Viola Davis) has a penchant for rainbow-colored, poisonous snakes that she unleashes upon the remaining Tributes. "The simulation of the snakes was a monumental task from Ghost VFX which also did the look development on each snake," explains De Wet. "We

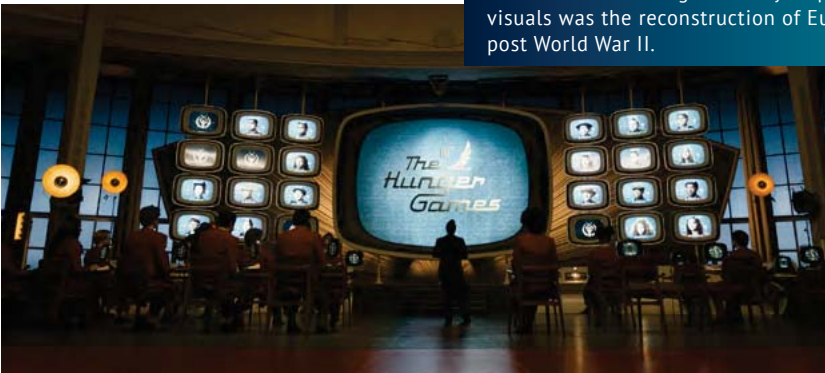




'What I've learned from my 10 years of working on *The Hunger Games* movies with Francis is that the success lies in shooting something which has an existing element to it.'

— VFX supervisor Adrian de Wet

DELIVERING A DAZZLING DYSTOPIA: The popular new Hunger Games prequel required 1,400 VFX shots by Important Looking Pirates, GhostVFX, Outpost VFX and RISE. Among the many inspirations for the visuals was the reconstruction of European cities post World War II.



went through several iterations with the look of the snakes because of the rainbow iridescence on the surface, but Francis also wanted them to be a quite saturated native color as well. Striking the right balance there was tricky and [also] to get them to react correctly in the light and shadows, because usually you only get iridescence if you get the right light and direction. But we had to have the snakes iridescent even in the shadows and had to cheat that to make it visually interesting, otherwise they went a dull gray-brown."

Along with roto animating digital doubles to the actors in the plate, cloth simulations were critical in getting the proper interaction between the cast and snakes.

"To get the snakes to look like they're crawling over someone's shirt you need the creases of the fabric being compressed, stretched, ruffled and twisted when they're going over the arm of Lucy Gray Baird [Rachel Zegler]," he says. "A huge amount of effort and detail exists in the interaction between snakes and the individuals being covered by them."

Birds played a key role in the prequel's world-building. "I'm always sensitive to how birds animate because whatever you think birds should do, they never do that!" says De Wet, laughing. "We were asking quite a lot of the Jabberjays, because in the story Dr. Gaul has figured out how to use them as a recording and playback device. We had the Jabberjays freeze and go into zombie mode when they were listening,

and when playing back we kept them moving because birds have very alive, staccato movements and are constantly breathing."

In one sequence, drones transport water bottles into the arena at the behest of a Tribute's mentor. "Our production designer, Uli Hanisch, did a great job of designing the drones with this warm brass color. It already had a period piece, Steampunk, Art Deco look to it. We took his design and made digital versions of it and attached digital water bottles to them and got the propellers to move around. For them to be a threat to hit people, they had to move very fast. One of the key elements was the dust that gets kicked up from the floor because without it, you might not notice the drones. When we shot that there were no drones, so the actors had to mime the whole thing."

Screen composites were used for the 1984-style monitor shots. "We did have playback on set, which was useful to get the interactive light from the screen and to have the actors perform to something," reveals De Wet. "However, we ended up replacing every single monitor because when you go into the cutting room and cut it together you get a different order than you should have!"

De Wet has nothing but praise for his VFX team. "My visual effects producer, Eve Fizzinoglia, was instrumental on this as she made miraculous visual effects production decisions," he says. "I was overlapping with the movie *Slumberland* right at the begin-

ning of the show, so for a big portion of the shoot I had Sean Stranks on set for me."

Working for Scales

The VFX supervisor says that, looking back, the movie's biggest challenge was the CG creation of the snakes. "Not only snake animation, which is hard, but also snake interaction. We had to create rubble and pebbles on surfaces for the snakes to move between as well as make dust on surfaces, so they could leave a trail to make the audience believe in them. And we had to do all of the cloth simulations with the clothes."

De Wet says one common element can be found in each installment of franchise. "What I've learned from my 10 years working on *The Hunger Games* movies with Francis is that the success lies in shooting something which has an existing element to it," he notes. "For instance, the Corso with the statue, that is Karl-Marx-Allee in Berlin. The base of the buildings and street layout is really there and that little roundabout in the middle with the statue is real too. We created and duplicated existing façades, added a war-torn patina to it and inserted buildings in the background which were partially constructed with scaffolding and a symmetrical layout. That has always been the basis of how we do The Capitol in these movies." ♦

Lionsgate's *The Hunger Games: The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* was released in theaters in November.

An Eye on the Year's Top VFX Oscar Contenders

2023 proved to be a big year for both epic spectacles and subtle, invisible effects.

- By Trevor Hogg -

The theatrical release showdown that pitted *Barbie* and *Oppenheimer* against each other and sparked the “Barbenheimer” marketing sensation is likely to repeat itself at the 96th Academy Awards. However, the studios and filmmakers behind those movies may have neutralized their chances of walking away with the Oscar for Best Visual Effects by downplaying the role of digital compositing and augmentation. If this holds true, then *The Creator* may emerge as the visual effects front-runner as Gareth Edwards has excelled in splicing together the DNA of documentary camerawork with an epic sci-fi storytelling style à la James Cameron.

A dark horse but worthy competitor is Pixar's *Elemental*, which essentially featured an entire cast of effects characters and was no easy feat to accomplish for the studio. On the more fun and sheer escapist side of things are *Dungeons & Dragons: Honor Among Thieves* and the whimsical *Wonka*. Then, there's the early summer release *Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny*, which took honoring the original film to a whole new level. Don't count out the slick visual pleasures of the Keanu Reeves vehicle, *John Wick: Chapter 4*, and the subtle digital artistry of Martin Scorsese's bitter historic chapter, *Killers of the Flower Moon*. Here is our (alphabetical) rundown of some of the year's biggest VFX award contenders. (The shortlist of 10 competing VFX Oscar titles will be unveiled by the Academy on December 21.)

Barbie

Director: Greta Gerwig

Released by: Warner Bros.

Release Date: July 21, 2023

VFX Supervisor: Glen Pratt

VFX Houses: Framestore, Chicken Bone FX, FuseFX, UPP, Lola VFX

Notes: The infectious playfulness of director Greta Gerwig could be felt in every aspect of this movie. In the VFX arena, virtual production took full advantage of the artificiality of Barbie Land. Miniatures were constructed for key parts of Barbie Land and then scanned and rebuilt as 3D digital assets, which were dressed into shots as needed. The miniature feel was kept to fit into the toy aesthetic of the setting.



Outpost VFX, Crafty Apes

Notes: After experiencing the misfortune as a digital artist of having shots be constantly revised, Gareth Edwards decided to implement a reverse-engineered methodology to the world – building, which meant “shoot first and conceptualize afterwards.” As a result, landscape dictated the design choices rather than be reshaped to emulate the concept art. Also noteworthy was the virtual production component for the third act, which takes place in the NOMAD space station as it orbits Earth.

Dungeons & Dragons: Honor Among Thieves

Director: John Francis Daley, Jonathan Goldstein

Released by: Paramount

Release Date: March 31, 2023

VFX Supervisor: Ben Snow

VFX Houses: ILM, MPC, Crafty Apes, Onyx VFX, SDFX Studio, Legacy Effects

Notes: An irreverent attitude prevails in this cinematic adaptation of the fantasy roleplaying game. The movie features an overweight fire-breathing dragon and chatty skeletons awakened from their graves. There's also a gelatinous cube monster in a maze chase and a rampaging beast called the Owlbear. At the core of every image was a practical element, with face replacements mostly taken from other footage.



The Creator

Director: Gareth Edwards

Released by: 20th Century Studios

Release Date: Sept. 29, 2023

VFX Supervisor: Jay Cooper

VFX Houses: ILM, MARZ, Atomic Arts, Folks VFX, Fin Design + Effects,





Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3

Director: James Gunn

Released by: Disney

Release Date: May 5, 2023

VFX Supervisor:

Stephane Ceretti

VFX Houses: Framestore,

Wētā FX, Sony Pictures

Imageworks, ILM, Rodeo

FX, RISE, Crafty Apes,

BUF, Lola VFX, Perception, Compuhire, SDFX Studios

Notes: Already known for showcasing believable CG principal characters with Groot and Rocket Raccoon, the franchise's third theatrical outing features a highly intelligent canine in an astronaut suit known as Cosmo the Spacedog. James Gunn aptly sets an action sequence to a rocking popular song in a hallway fight, which had 18 shots stitched together into one long continuous take.



Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny

Director: James Mangold

Released by: Disney

Release Date: June 30, 2023

VFX Supervisor: Andrew

Whitehurst

VFX Houses: ILM, Soho

VFX, Rising Sun Pictures,

Important Looking

Pirates, The Yard VFX,

Crafty Apes, Midas VFX,

Onyx VFX, Capital T, FirestormVFX

Notes: Action set pieces range from an aircraft flying in the middle of a storm to our hero trying to outrun a subway car on horseback and diving underwater to uncover the Cave of Dionysus filled with CG creepy crawlies. The major accomplishment was the use of ILM FaceSwap and machine learning to create a 25-minute opening action sequence that looks like lost footage rediscovered from *Raiders of Lost Ark* back when Harrison Ford was 40 years younger.



John Wick: Chapter 4

Director: Chad Stahelski

Released by: Lionsgate

Release Date: March 24, 2023

VFX Supervisor: Janelle

Croshaw Ralla

VFX Houses: WeFX, Light

VFX, Rodeo FX,

Pixomondo, One of Us,

The Yard VFX, Tryptyc,

Boxel, Crafty Apes, Atomic

Arts, Mavericks VFX, Incessant Rain, Fotokem

Notes: Incendiary shotgun shells, the eyes of a blind assassin, a CG dog, ring finger removals and a CG re-creation of Paris' Arc de Triomphe are just a few of the rich visual effects work that supported the stunts and actor Keanu Reeves, who was determined to do as



much stunt work himself as possible. The attention to detail went as far as emulating the aberrations associated with the ARRI ALFA lenses chosen by cinematographer Dan Laustsen.

Killers of the Flower Moon

Director: Martin Scorsese

Released by: Paramount, Apple

Release Date: Oct. 20, 2023

VFX Supervisor: Pablo Helman

VFX Houses: ILM

Notes: Finding the right balance between artistry and realistic imagery

that Martin Scorsese wanted was the primary goal of these visual and special effects teams. Expansive world-building was accomplished through digital augmentation – in particular, for the reveal of the massive oil derrick field and the adding of hundreds and hundreds of cows to an aerial shot of a cattle ranch owned by the nefarious William Hale.



The Marvels

Director: Nia DaCosta

Released by: Disney

Release Date: Nov. 10, 2023

VFX Supervisor: Tara DeMarco

VFX Houses: ILM, RISE, Rising Sun Pictures, Sony

Pictures Imageworks,

Trixter, Wētā FX. Minor

vendors: Framestore, Perception, Wylie VFX, The Mill, Untold, SDFX, Blue Pencil Concept

Notes: Girl power is on full MCU display to the detriment of even the most robust of render farms. This is because Captain Marvel can absorb and project energy; Ms. Marvel harnesses cosmic energy to enlarge her body; and Monica Rambeau can transform her physical form into X-rays, gamma energy, cosmic rays, infrared and radio waves. And let's not forget the Flerken known as Goose, which is a scene-stealing combination of kitty cat cuteness and lethal danger. (Watch out for those tentacles that shoot from its mouth!)



Mission: Impossible – Dead Reckoning Part One

Director: Christopher McQuarrie

Released by: Paramount

Release Date: July 12, 2023

VFX Supervisor: Alex Wuttke

VFX Houses: ILM, Atomic Arts, beloFX, BlueBolt,

One of Us, Blind LTD,

Rodeo FX, Alchemy 24, Lola VFX, Territory Studio, Cheap Shot VFX,



Untold Studios

Notes: It is true that Tom Cruise is fearless and does death-defying stunts. However, a safety net was provided by the visual effects team to ensure that the handcuffed car chase in Rome, motorcycle cliff leap in Norway and *Uncharted*-style train crash filmed at Darlton Quarry become the cinematic events envisioned by director Christopher McQuarrie. The shots of a military submarine were also made possible by CGI, and the interior set images were digitally enhanced too.

Napoleon

Director: Ridley Scott
Released by: Columbia, Apple
Release Date: Nov. 22, 2023
VFX Supervisor: Charley Henley

VFX Houses: MPC, ILM, BlueBolt, Outpost VFX, One of Us, Light VFX, PFX, Ghost VFX, The Magic Camera Company

Notes: If there ever were a major case study for crowd simulations, this is the one. For this epic, five different battles were staged, and the CG soldiers had to blend seamlessly with the on-set extras. The English locations had to be transformed into their French counterparts. Also, natural elements such as smoke and pigeons add life and atmosphere to each shot. A big visual high point involves a cannonball and an animatronic horse.



Oppenheimer

Director: Christopher Nolan
Released by: Universal
Release Date: July 21, 2023
VFX Supervisor: Andrew Jackson

VFX House: DNEG

Notes: A Skunk Works approach was adopted to re-create the Trinity nuclear test and bring the subatomic world to cinematic life. This allowed the randomness associated with real physics and materials to be naturally embedded into the imagery. Among the elements experimented with were high explosives, liquid fuel, metal flakes in water, spinning beads, magnets, ball bearings, cloud tanks and thermite, which became indispensable. Rear projection was used to further illustrate the mental state of the title character.

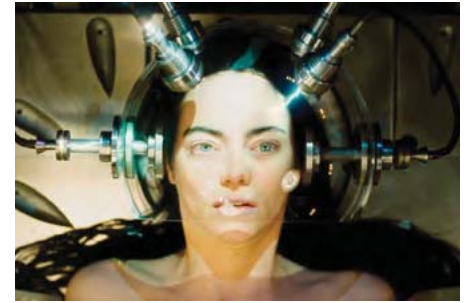


Poor Things

Director: Yorgos Lanthimos
Released by: Searchlight Pictures
Release Date: Dec. 8, 2023
VFX Supervisor: Simon Hughes
VFX Houses: Union VFX, Absolute Post, Time Based Arts, Cheap Shot

VFX

Notes: How do you retell the story of *Frankenstein* when the gender is switched and the action unfolds in what *The Guardian* describes as “a steampunk-retro-futuristic Victorian freakout”? Apparently, virtual production was the answer, with main vendor Union VFX doing the shoot planning, on-set supervision, 30 test shots and creating 177 shots and 60 assets for the satirical horror project. Absolute Post did a street scene in London; Time Based Arts looked after the chapter headings; and Cheap Shot VFX was responsible for temp visual effects, compositing and cleanup shots.



Wonka

Director: Paul King
Released by: Warner Bros.

Release Date: Dec. 15, 2023

VFX Supervisor: Graham Page

VFX Houses: Framestore, Goldcrest VFX, Host VFX, Outpost VFX

Notes: Set in a fictional European city, the origin story of Willy Wonka and his chocolate factory was shot in England in Lyme Regis, Bath, London, Oxford and at Warner Bros. Studios, Leavesden. The highlight of more than 1,163 VFX shots is the incredibly complex facial animation and the highly detailed build of our new Oompa Loompa, played by Hugh Grant. Other showstoppers include the fully digital environment for the rooftop dance scene and a CG-created giraffe.



The Year's Other Top Players

Aquaman and the Lost Kingdom (Warner Bros.)

Blue Beetle (Warner Bros.)

Cocaine Bear (Universal)

Elemental (Disney)

The Hunger Games: Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes (Lionsgate)

The Little Mermaid (Disney)

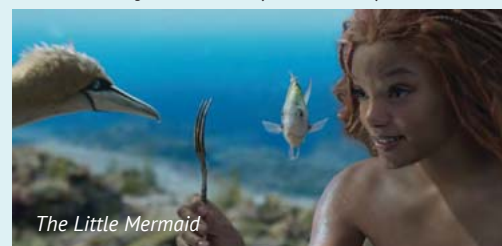
M3GAN (Universal)

Meg 2: The Trench (Warner Bros.)

Rebel Moon – Part One: A Child of Fire (Netflix)

Strays (Universal)

Transformers: Rise of the Beasts (Paramount) ♦



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BEST PRODUCTION DESIGN

PATRICK O'KEEFE

BEST SOUND

Re-recording Mixers
MICHAEL SEMANICK, CAS
JUAN PERALTA
Supervising Sound Editor
GEOFFREY G. RUBAY

BEST PICTURE

PHIL LORD, p.g.a.
CHRISTOPHER MILLER, p.g.a.
AMY PASCAL, p.g.a.
AVI ARAD, p.g.a.
CHRISTINA STEINBERG, p.g.a.

BEST ANIMATED FEATURE

BEST DIRECTOR

JOAQUIM DOS SANTOS, KEMP POWERS,
JUSTIN K. THOMPSON

BEST VISUAL EFFECTS

MICHAEL LASKER,
ALAN HAWKINS,
BRET ST. CLAIR,
PAV GROCHOLA

BEST ORIGINAL SCORE

DANIEL PEMBERTON

BEST ORIGINAL SONG

“AM I DREAMING”

Written By

LELAND TYLER WAYNE,
ROISEE, RAKIM MAYERS,
MIKE DEAN,
PETER LEE JOHNSON
AND LANDON “SCRIPT” WAYNE



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Tech Reviews

- By Todd Sheridan Perry -



Blackmagic Design's URSA Mini Pro 12K

Blackmagic Design first released its URSA Mini Pro 12K camera back in the summer of 2020, making a giant leap from 4.6K up to 12K. This past summer, the company delivered its new URSA Mini Pro 12 OLPF. As expected, there are a great many similarities and a few differences. So, here's my recap:

The URSA 12K has a CMOS sensor the size of a Super 35 film negative. This is great because not only does it make for a lot of resolution (up to 12,288 x 6480), but it also means that the lenses that were meant for cinema cameras will act like those lenses. 35 millimeter on a Blackmagic will basically have the same field of view as if you put it on an early Panaflex Millennium or an Arriflex 435. Also, when changing your acquisition resolution, the frame doesn't crop in, so your FOV doesn't change. The exception is when shooting at higher frame rates at 4K and 6K; then it *does* crop to a Super 16. Speaking of higher frame rates, the URSA records 12K at 60fps, 4K/6K/8K at 120fps and 4K at 240fps. For my two cents, 4K is plenty — but there are some benefits to shooting 12K, such as for pulling green-screen mattes and then mashing comp edges organically when scaling down to 4K for delivery.

The chip does not use a Bayer pattern and shoots only in the proprietary Blackmagic Codec (BRAW). This might sound inconvenient for those

used to ProRes and others, but there are good reasons. The codec is really compact; I converted BRAW to ProRes and found the ProRes to be two to three times the size. BRAW has 14 stops of dynamic range and pretty reasonable file sizes, even at lower compression ratios. Plus, the codec is designed to work natively within Resolve — so there is a synergistic partnership between the acquired footage and the software using it. But fear not: There is a BRAW plugin so that Avid Media Composer, Adobe Premiere/After Effects and Sony Vegas can work with the footage. Nuke Studio/NukeX also supports BRAW as of Nuke 13.0 — but tread lightly, because as of this writing there is a bug that is being worked on regarding the Foundry side for BRAW files coming from the OLPF. I'm sure it will be worked out by the time this review comes out.

What makes the OLPF flavor of the camera better than the original 12K is *literally* the OLPF (Optical Low Pass Filter). This filter, which is matched to the frequency of the sensor, comes in handy for Virtual Production. High-frequency LED matrices in video walls will frequently cause moiré (large-scale interference) patterns, especially with sharp glass and high-resolution sensors. The OLPF reduces the banding you might pick up when shooting in LED volumes. Additionally, the OLPF uses updated IR filtering that plusses up red color response.

I have a few minor quibbles: The body is a bit

heavy, so it's not really a run-and-gun type of camera. The LED display is great, but I would love it if it had a broader range of motion so a director could view the display without moving the camera operator. The camera doesn't have an HDMI port to plug into an additional monitor (which would negate the previous note) without setting up an SDI to HDMI conversion. (Or maybe I'm just lazy!)

At \$6,385, it's an investment, but still reasonable compared to other cinema cameras. However, if you aren't shooting on LED stages you could get by with the older model, which you can find from \$4,000 to \$5,000.

Website: blackmagicdesign.com

Price: \$6,385

Lenovo's ThinkPad P16 Gen 2

Reviewing Lenovo products is somewhat new to me, but you got to start somewhere!

When working with Lenovo, we specifically spec'd out a ThinkPad P16 Gen 2 that wasn't going to have a Gen III Hemi with NOs. You can certainly throw a lot into this little chassis, but we wanted to try and be more conservative and put together something that would be in most people's price range.

What we put together was an AMD Ryzen 5 PRO 7540U processor with an integrated AMD Radeon 740M card. (We were losing the RTX option, though, because we wanted to pair the AMD products and have them complement each other.) We had 32GB of RAM, which is enough for most things I might be doing. However, it's unfortunately soldered in, so there was no upgrading it. The internal drive is 1TB (remember when a terabyte didn't even exist as a drive?). And the display is "just" 1920 x 1200 (non-touch) — although you can display more on external monitors through the USB-C and USB4 ports. This particular setup is priced at about \$1,200, which is pretty modest.

The chassis has a small footprint and is surprisingly lightweight, which is great for throwing in the backpack and heading to, say, the coffee shop, or wherever you take your work. Having three USB-3 ports, one USB-C and one USB4 feels like plenty (although I'd probably carry around a hub with me). The USB4 is your power port connected to a small 65W power supply. It can also act as a charging port for your phone.

I'm running some conversion and rendering



software that is basically pinning the CPU, and while the fans have spun up, they aren't terribly loud. And the bottom of the laptop is remaining tolerable to the touch. Setting it on your lap might not be the best idea because you'd be blocking the airflow — and you just might start to feel the heat.

The speeds in Photoshop, After Effects, Premiere and Resolve are totally acceptable, even if I am not benefitting from having an RTX card inside (which is an option if you go with an Intel processor). The display is crisp, and at 16 inches, I don't see a ton of benefit from getting up to UHD. I'd opt to go out to an external monitor. However, the sound is a bit tinny on the little speakers, so I would most likely choose to listen on headphones.

One nit to pick has to do with keyboard configuration. I've heard a lot of people complain about having the number keypad on their laptop because it shifts the center of your keyboard over; this was not my problem. It's the switching of the Function and Control keys that gets to me. The muscle memory is so ingrained that putting those keys in different places makes copying and pasting a mental chore. So, if you can change anything, Lenovo,

please put those keys back where they should be!

Website: Lenovo.com

Nvidia's RTX 5000

This past summer, Nvidia came out with its Ada generation series for the RTX cards. I got to play with the RTX 5000 — not to be confused with the RTX A5000. *(Please don't get me started on these naming conventions!)* The card is the mid-tier model of this generation but still has a ton of power and 32GB of RAM, which is certainly no slouch.

The Ada Lovelace architecture (named after mathematician and writer Augusta Ada King, Countess of Lovelace, who is credited with laying the groundwork for modern computing) doubles the speed of the ray-tracing cores from the previous gen (which is most important to my rendering mind). But the Tensor Cores, which drive the AI-power, has a four-times increase in inference performance. The CUDA cores double the single-precision floating-point operations.

However, it's not all about raw computing. The architecture is set up with an optimized AV1 stack to accelerate video transcoding, streaming, video-

conferencing, AR, VR and AI vision. It can host more parallel video streams and speed up JPEG decoders for computer vision.

This might sound like a lot of technical gobble-dy-gook, especially for those that just want to know "how much faster is it going to make my workflow and renders." But I'm specifically trying to separate these RTX cards from consumer-based gaming cards. The end goal is different: The cards we are talking about are enterprise-level graphics cards. Yes, they are great at ray-tracing and making pretty pictures. But they are also meant for AI training, computer vision and simulations.

In benchmark comparisons between last year's RTX A6000 with 48GB of RAM and this year's RTX 5000 with 32GB of RAM, they are remarkably similar. Outside of load-time, the ray-trace benchmarks are really close. This is an indication that newer chips are doing their job and performing the same functions faster with less power. And quite literally too: The RTX A6000 max power consumption is 300W, while the RTX 5000 is 250W.

The price of the RTX 5000 hovers around \$4,200 to \$5,400 (about what you could find the RTX A6000 for), which is substantially more than GeForce cards, but you have to ask yourself what your end goal is. Additionally, you need to assess how much math you are going to throw at the card. In order to take advantage of GPU rendering, the scene has to be loaded into RAM, and if the majority of your work is going to be greater than your available RAM, then you need more RAM, which means a bigger card — or more cards.

The RTX 5000 Ada is a strong addition to the Nvidia lineup. It'll definitely power through most things you throw at it. And if you are into AI stuff and calculations that dig into the Tensor Cores, you'll want to check out these kinds of cards.

Website: nvidia.com/en-us/design-visualization/rtx-5000/

Price: \$4,000-\$6,800

Todd Sheridan Perry is an award-winning VFX supervisor and digital artist. You can reach him at todd@teaspoonvfx.com.





Thoughts on Animating with the New Machines

Industry veterans address the pros and cons of AI at the recent Manchester Animation Festival.

- By Kévin Giraud -



Glen Marshall's *The Crow* is one of the first animated shorts made entirely with the aid of OpenAI's CLIP.

Not so long ago, the main concern of the animation industry would have been the return of COVID. However, for more than a year now, the tiny virus seems to be the least of the animation industry's concerns as artificial intelligence looms over an anxious sector, in the wake of one of the longest strikes in Hollywood history.

In a survey on AI conducted by Manchester Animation Festival, 85% of surveyed professionals consider AI to be a threat to the creative industry. A panel gathered at the Animation Nation Forum in November to address this major trend. So, if AI is here to stay, which seemed obvious to every panelist, how does the animation industry plan to resist the siren song of less expensive creation and cost-cutting techniques, while preserving its own creativity and freedom?

The panel featured David Holt, one of the

U.K.'s foremost animation voice talents, who recently discovered that his voice was made available by the Uberduck text-to-voice software; Pinar Oruc, a lecturer at the University of Manchester who specializes in intellectual property law; Hameed Adigun, director of the animation company Ronu Creative; Jack Leigh, owner and creative director of Eight Engines; and Blue Zoo's co-founder Tom Box. The latter three are all working with AI today and trying to find ethical ways to integrate the technology into their workflow.

From Fear to Understanding

Festival director Steve Henderson's mention of the AI-generated anxiety in the U.K. industry was no surprise to the group. As Holt pointed out, "For me, as a performer, this generative process is, in a way, quite amusing. But it has massive implications. Acting is not only my profession; it is also my craft and my life. Even

if technology makes it possible for me to stay on my couch and earn money from AI-generated derivatives of my voice, I would never want that. And I think it can hurt the industry. It's a bit of a Wild West right now." Equity [U.K.'s trade union for the performing arts and entertainment industries] surveyed its members on AI earlier this year and 93% of the audio sector considered it a threat, reported Holt.

On the other hand, AI may also be used to preserve careers or boost creativity. As Tom Box noted, "AI could be used to prevent a young actor losing his job after his voice cracked. The question is: Where do you draw the line? Generative AI is a tool that can be used for enhancement, better physics simulation. It all depends on what part of the pipeline you're talking about and where you put these new tools to use."

This perspective was shared by Hameed Adigun, who has been exploring AI as a tool to ex-



Hameed Adigun



Tom Box



Jack Leigh



David Holt

pedite storyboarding. “We want to use AI to allow creatives to do less boring stuff, while knowing that there are decisions AI cannot make. The human element will always be necessary. An AI [tool] cannot tell you what is ‘cool’ or not, but it can help relieve the teams and allow for more creativity. And most of the people are already using it without truly knowing it.”

According to the MAF survey, while only 21% of surveyed people are currently using AI in their workflow, 49% of them think it could be useful in their animation pipelines. Tools cited were ChatGPT (31%), MidJourney (20%), Dall-E (17%) and Adobe Firefly (15%). “There is a difference between using Adobe to enhance [a] background or to add a brick wall in a shot and using MidJourney to create whole new images,” Adigun noted. “The industry has to agree upon where to draw that line. The discussion is about the transparency about those models and where we put them to use.”

Jack Leigh pointed out, “AI is also a way to lower the barrier for entry. These tools can open doors to new storytellers, new people previously barred from animation because of the technical skill it requires.”

That doesn’t mean that quality standards are going to go down, though. “There will probably be more quantity than quality in the beginning,” said Box. “But, in a way, it makes our own work look better.”

Global Tools with Local Legal Challenges

Besides employment-related anxieties, AI also raises many copyright questions. These are inquiries that Pinar Oruc has been tackling for

some time in the U.K. “[The] issues with AI-created material is that, if you want to copyright it, who is the author? And that varies between countries. In the U.S., there has to be a human author for art to be copyrighted; it’s not as simple in the U.K. or the EU. Who then is the author? Is it the creator of the tool, the person responsible for typing the prompts of the AI itself?” Oruc said. “And there are also specifics laws on training data, which is at the heart of the generative AI process. The EU has adopted exceptions, such as opt-out options for writers and artists, so that their works cannot be used to train AI. But it is a truly fast industry and these things take time. That is why, in the U.K., institutions around [intellectual property] are asking the stakeholders for their input and their experience in order to adapt laws efficiently.”

This opinion is shared by a large majority of the industry. “In order to tackle these challenges and reduce anxiety, we want to work with other people in our industry to create some kind of manifesto,” said Box, who is also chair of ScreenSkills’ Animation Skills Council.

Eye on the Future

Beyond that panel, AI was also mentioned many times during the events of the week. Mark Taylor, co-managing director of A Productions, commented on the latest trend in AI-generated pitches. “The problem is that it makes for great pitches, and of course you can do it on your phone in about 10 minutes. But at the end of the day, it’s not doable as a project,” Taylor said.

And although AI cannot — and will probably not — replace creators and skilled artists, it

may be able to provide better content and better jobs. As Taylor noted, “In the 2000s, a lot of rotoscoping animation was outsourced from the U.K. to cheaper countries and people were scared that this would make for less entry-level jobs in animation. It didn’t materialize; instead, it opened up animation jobs and graduates filled them directly. AI may have the same positive outcome.”

While presenting the trailblazing African studio Kugali Media in a separate panel, Hamid Ibrahim addressed the issues facing animators in Africa, a continent filled with talent and potential but still riddled by a lack of funding. “At Kugali, our AI stance is that the technology may be used as reference, but not further,” said Ibrahim. “I’m obviously worried about it, as I know the AI companies are set out to replace creatives, and if it’s proven that creatives surpass AI, the technology will simply disappear. But I hope that, as in other industries, creativity and craftsmanship will prevail and make it even a higher standard.” So, what’s next? For this group of panelists, the future may be brighter. Reacting to recent comments made by former DreamWorks chief Jeffrey Katzenberg, Box didn’t think AI will cut animation crews by 90 percent. “Having AI as a tool will increase productivity and quality. I think the problem is, at the moment anyone who is comfortable with the use of AI is not talking right now. But it is a new technology, much like 3D was. Why should we not use it?” ♦

Manchester Animation Festival’s survey on AI is due to be released later this month. You find out more at manchesteranimationfestival.co.uk.



Netflix Japan used AI to produce background art for the short film *The Dog and the Boy*.



Chad Nelson and Nik Kleverov created their short *Critterz* using DALL-E’s image generation capabilities.



It's always a pleasure to get a glimpse of the daily life of a rising talent. This month, **Flóra Anna Buda**, the lovely and talented director of the animated short, **27**, shared a few pics from her world with us. After winning the top prizes at Cannes, Annecy and numerous other festivals, she's ready to shine for the year-end award season.



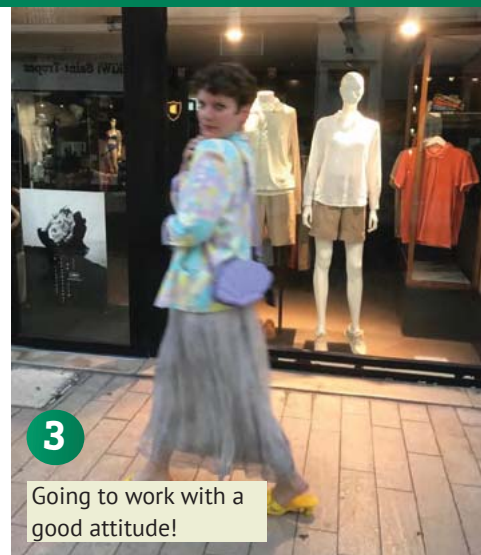
1

It's time to face a new morning.



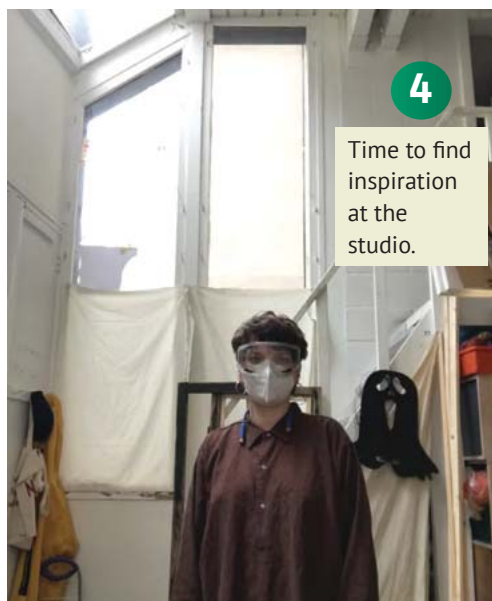
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Always start the day with fresh coffee.



3

Going to work with a good attitude!



4

Time to find inspiration at the studio.



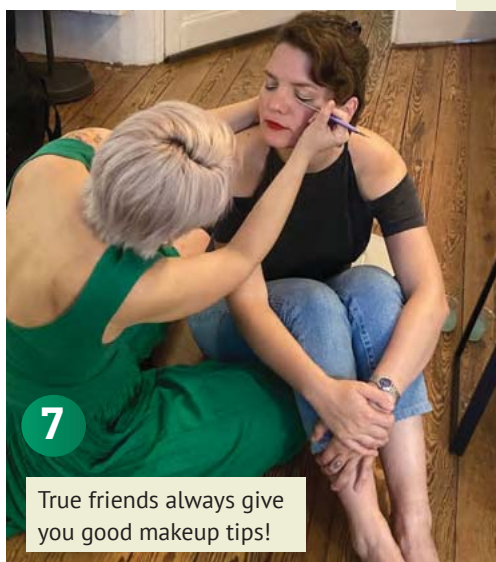
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Always find time to have lunch with good friends.



6

Back to work: An artist's job is never done.



7

True friends always give you good makeup tips!



8

I meet some terrific women at the **World Animation Summit** party in L.A.

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SETH ROGEN, P.G.A., EVAN GOLDBERG, P.G.A., JAMES WEAVER, P.G.A., JEFF ROWE

“IRRESISTIBLE”

PETE HAMMOND, DEADLINE

“EMOTION AT EVERY TURN”

TOM JORGENSEN, IGN

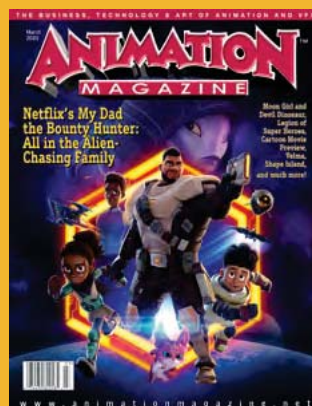
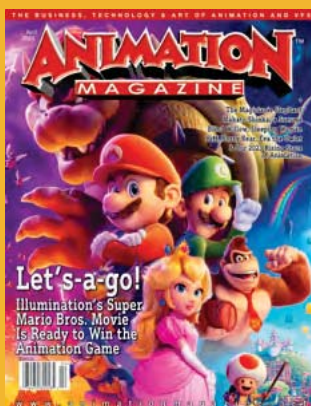
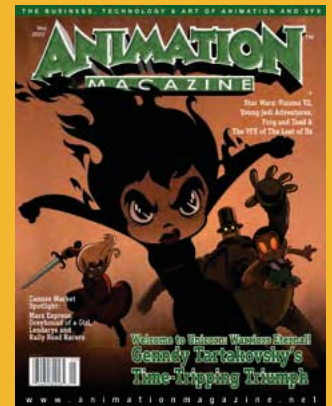
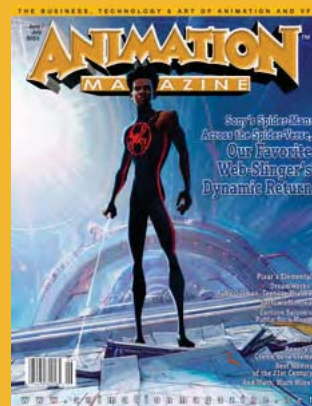
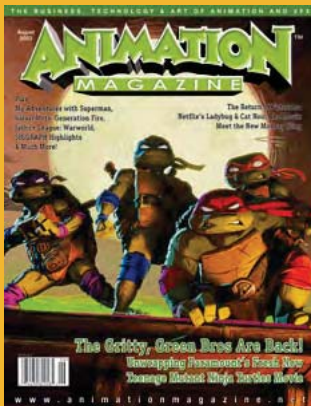
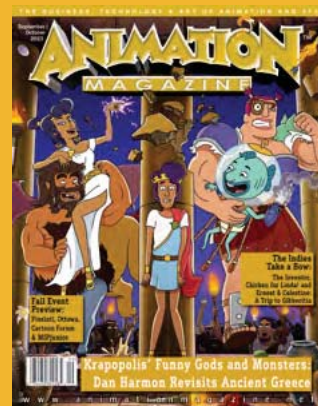
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FOR MODERN ANIMATION”**

ANDREW J. SALAZAR, DISCUSSING FILM

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TURTLES
MUTANT
MAYHEM**



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THOMAS NEWMAN

BEST ORIGINAL SONG

"STEAL THE SHOW"

Composed by

LAUV and THOMAS NEWMAN

Lyrics by

LAUV and MICHAEL MATOSIC

"THE MUSIC OF 'ELEMENTAL'
STANDS OUT AS ONE OF
PIXAR'S FINEST."

AWARDSWATCH

"A STRIKINGLY BEAUTIFUL
AND WONDROUS
ADVENTURE."

CHICAGO SUN-TIMES

"SUBTLE YET SPECTACULAR
CHARACTER ANIMATION BRINGS
THIS LATEST TALE TO LIFE."

Paste

Disney · PIXAR

ELEMENTAL

"IT'S THE MOST HUMAN ROM-COM IN YEARS.

The film's loveliest stretches watch the pair tentatively discover each other's habitats. It's a girl-meets-boy cross-cultural romantic comedy—a good one that woos us to root for the big kiss."

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"THIS IS AS STUNNING A VISUAL ACHIEVEMENT AS PIXAR HAS EVER HAD.

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Paste

*"'Elemental' **BRINGS FIRE AND WATER TOGETHER** in a romance that should leave you misty."*

CNN

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ELEMENTAL